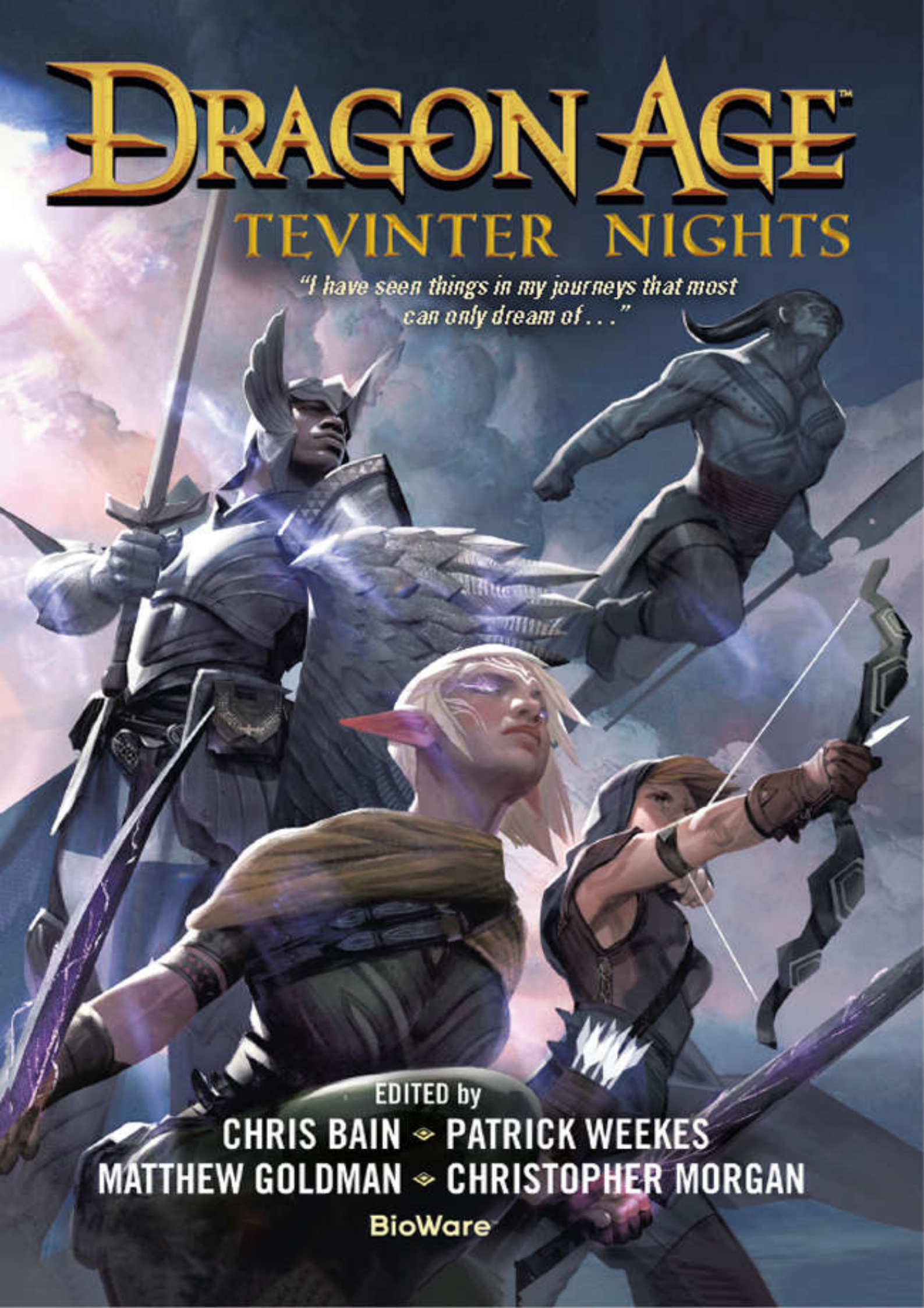
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TEVINTER NIGHTS
"I have seen things in my journeys that most can only dream of . . ."
EDITED by
CHRIS BAIN ◆ PATRICK WEEKES
MATTHEW GOLDMAN ◆ CHRISTOPHER MORGAN
BioWare

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TEVINTER NIGHTS

EDITED BY

CHRIS BAIN,
PATRICK WEEKES,
MATTHEW GOLDMAN,
AND
CHRISTOPHER MORGAN

TITAN BOOKS
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DRAGON AGE™

TEVINTER NIGHTS

The World of
THEDAS
Colean Sea
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THREE TREES TO MIDNIGHT

PATRICK WEEKES

Myrion of Ventus didn't know much about Qunari. Until last week, they had been an annoyance, something young soldiers went off to fight while everyone else grumbled about the taxes they paid to defend the Imperium from the savage ox-men. That ignorance had ended in a blast of cannon fire, and in less than a day, Ventus, jewel of the Tevinter Imperium, had fallen.

The Qunari had cut down anyone wearing armor. Those who were unarmed, they had herded into different groups. The women, children, and elderly had quickly returned to their homes. The mages had screamed horribly as alchemical concoctions killed their minds and left them as empty husks who stumbled along, sweeping dirt from the streets with awful vacant stares, their beautiful gold-trimmed robes dragging in the dirt behind them.

The men, however, had been put into work camps.

The afternoon sun was blinding after days down in the hold of the Qunari ship. Myrion squinted, his chained legs rattling as he shuffled along in the line of prisoners. The sandy beach gave way to grass, and shortly thereafter to forest, where a dense cloud of black foliage hunkered over twisted green tree trunks as though preparing to lash out at the weeds below.

"Vishante kaffas," Myrion muttered. The Qunari bastards had taken them to the outskirts of Arlathan Forest.

The last of the prisoners were off the ship now, and shirtless Qunari roared at them to line up, waving swords that looked like they could chop through a horse with no appreciable difficulty. Finally, a Qunari even larger than the others stepped forward. His face was twisted into a scowl, his gray skin painted gold with red slashes, and his armor was a mass of knotted rope twisting around jutting spikes. His horns were jagged and swept forward to either side of his face like a low helmet. One horn had been chopped off, probably in battle, and replaced with steel.

"Bas!" he called, his deep voice sending a shudder through Myrion's gut. "That is what you are. *Bas*. Things. You do not know what is and is not. You need the guidance of the Qun to learn."

"How generous of you," muttered the prisoner who had been in front of Myrion, a tall man whose accent placed him as from the south. Myrion kept his head down. If the Qunari were going to single out someone for back talk, it wouldn't be him.

"I am Bas-taar, keeper of *bas*," the Qunari leader went on. "You belong to me now. Work, and you live. Resist, and you die. Run"—a slow smile twisted across his face—"and you belong to the Huntmaster." He gestured at another Qunari warrior, this one dressed in lighter armor, strips of leather and drakescale bound by crisp red ropes. His face was painted with stripes of black and white. His cold stare swept down the line of prisoners as Bas-taar went on. "Run, and he will track you down, and you will suffer, as the mages of Ventus suffered."

Myrion felt the panic rising up in him and fought it down with a conscious effort, clearing his mind and keeping his body still. When he was certain he could look up without giving himself away, Bas-taar had moved on.

"You will take axes. You will cut the trees. Prove you are useful and obedient, and you will one day earn a place in the Qun." Bas-taar looked across the line of prisoners, then let out a snort. "Come."

Myrion glanced nervously at the Huntmaster, but the Qunari tracker had walked back to the ship. Qunari guards came forward, carrying massive chests between them, and dropped them to the sand. As Myrion drew closer, he saw that the chests were filled with wood axes—heavy and clumsy, sharp enough to fell a tree but too clumsy to be much use in

a fight. Each prisoner got one, and as he did, he was released from the long prisoners' chain.

The prisoners weren't released fully, though. Before they were freed from the prisoners' chain, they were shackled into pairs, each pair connected at the ankle by a length of chain no longer than Myrion's forearm. Only a pair of circus performers could run while tied together like that.

Before Myrion knew it, he and the prisoner in front of him were at the front of the line. The other prisoner stepped forward, back straight and shoulders square under his brown laborer's tunic. His hair was silver, Myrion noted, and revised the other prisoner's age up a few decades.

"Right," said the prisoner, holding out a callused hand to the guard standing over the chest of axes. "Off to work, then."

And as he turned, Myrion saw the points of the man's ears.

An elf. That explained everything. Myrion's mouth twisted into a sneer as the Qunari handed the elf the ax. Any elf in Ventus would have been a slave, so of course he'd have no loyalty to the Imperium, no understanding of what Tevinter had protected him from all these years. He'd probably laughed as the soldiers had been cut down, the mages poisoned, happy to trade one master for another.

"Filthy knife-ear," Myrion muttered, glaring at the elf, unaware that the words had worked themselves free from his mouth until the elf and the Qunari guard stared at him.

The elf was the first to recover. "Lazy shem isn't used to working," he said with an easy smile, "not with those soft hands of his. Chain me to another elf, so I don't embarrass the poor man."

"You'd embarrass me with your knife-eared stupidity," Myrion snapped, "and then stab me as soon as my back was turned."

"Quiet," the guard roared. "There will be no disruptions." He spoke slowly. Most of the Qunari didn't speak Trade well, Myrion remembered.

"Then chain me to a man, not this knife-ear," Myrion said, glaring at the silver-haired elf.

"Probably faster for everyone if you do it," the elf added. "The humans of Ventus are an ugly lot, and they only care for their own."

The guard hesitated for a moment, but then a booming voice startled them all.

"No." They all turned to see Bas-taar stomping over from another line of new prisoners—there were prison-ships landing all along the beach.

He glared at the guard, who shrank back, and then smiled at Myrion and the elf. "The *bas* must learn. There are no more elves, no more humans. There are only *bas*, who must work to prove themselves worthy of serving the Qun." He turned to the guard. "Chain them together. Let them learn to work as one."

"As you say, Bas-taar," the guard murmured, and brought out a chain. He clapped one cuff around the elf's ankle, snapping it shut, and then turned to Myrion. Helpless, Myrion stepped forward. The cuff was cold on his right leg, pinching his tender skin as it snapped shut.

"As you say, Bas-taard," the elf said with an obedient smile, and the big Qunari looked at him, then nodded and strode off, ready to give orders to another line.

Myrion let out a shaky breath as the guard undid the prisoners' chain and slapped a woodcutting ax into his hand. He glared at the elf. "You could have gotten us killed."

"What's that, *shem?*" the elf asked, his face a mask of innocence. "These old knife-ears aren't as sharp as they used to be, and sometimes I hear things wrong."

"Go now and cut the trees," the guard said, pointing to the forest. Myrion saw that other paired prisoners were already at the edge of the wall of green, hacking away. "Work well, and you will eat well."

The elf started off, and Myrion stumbled as the chain jerked against his ankle. The elf looked back. "Come on, *shem*," he said with a little grin. "Try to keep up."

Myrion and the elf found an awkward rhythm after a few strides, keeping pace so that the two legs chained together moved as one. Myrion's legs were longer than the elf's, and he had to shorten his steps.

"You keep running your mouth like that, you'll get killed," Myrion said as they made their way across the grass, the chain hissing between them. "You're still a slave, idiot, only now you're a slave to beasts that will kill you as soon as look at you."

"What would you know about it?" the elf asked. His voice wasn't friendly anymore, and when Myrion looked over, he saw that the elf was looking ahead at the forest. "You're no laborer, whatever tunic you wear."

Myrion's breath hitched, and his grip tightened around the ax he carried. "You don't know what you're talking about, elf."

"Strife," the elf said.

"What?"

"There's more than one elf around here. Call me Strife. And I know what I'm talking about better than you, I'd wager." Strife, if that is what he wished to call himself, still wasn't looking at Myrion, squinting instead into the trees ahead of them. "The loose tunic hides your belly, but those nice rounded forearms say that you haven't missed many meals, and you keep your head down out of fear, not habit."

Myrion jerked his hands back up into his sleeves. "At least I keep my head down at all." They came to a stop as the grass thickened into waist-high weeds. On either side of them, other pairs of prisoners had already started chopping at the trees, the dull thumps of their clumsy blows echoing through the air. "What kind of stupid knife-ear calls the head guard a bastard?"

"One who wants to know how much Trade the head guard speaks." Strife smiled. "Now we know. Enough to talk to us, not enough to get nuance."

"What kind of *slave* talks about *nuance*?" Myrion snapped.

Strife stepped to the tree closest to them, a blunt ugly thing whose trunk was so thick that Myrion couldn't have reached his arms around it. "Guards are watching, *shem*. Probably want to start chopping." He stepped to the tree and swung his ax with casual strength, his blade biting into the bark.

"Myrion, *elf*. There's more than one shem around here." He stepped up, looked at the tree a bit uncertainly, hefted his ax, and swung.

The blade hit at an angle with a jolt that sent pins and needles up Myrion's arm, and he winced, dropping his ax. As it thudded into the soft turf, Strife burst out laughing.

"Now, there's a man who's never done a day's hard work in his life! What were you, Myrion, before you put on those laborer's clothes to hide from the Qunari? A merchant? A petty noble? A ma—"

Myrion was moving before he realized, and his fist smacked Strife in the face. The elf stumbled back, his smile gone and his face going red with anger. "Shut your mouth, you damned knife-ear!"

The smile was back a moment later, though, and the elf sank his ax into the soft turf and clenched his fists. "Why don't you make me, *shem?*"

Myrion came in with another swing, but this time the elf stepped into the blow and caught it on his tucked-up arms. It was like punching a thick rope, and Myrion's knuckles stung as he tried to step back, then stumbled as the chain reached its limit and nearly tripped him.

A sudden flash blossomed into pain, and Myrion staggered from a blow he hadn't even seen coming until it cracked across his face. In the distance, he heard yells and shouts, but then Strife punched him in the gut, and Myrion sank to his knees as the air whooshed out of him.

"Isn't that just like Tevinter?" Strife asked, standing over him. From the corner of his eye, Myrion saw that the Qunari guard was approaching, with Bas-taar himself alongside him. "Starting fights you can't finish. Take away your mages and your slaves and your blood magic, and you're all soft."

The guard put a hand to his blade, but Bas-taar grabbed his hand. He looked at Myrion and smiled, then shook his head.

"Now, get up and work," Strife muttered, leaning in.

Myrion lunged to his feet, ramming his head up and catching the surprised elf in the gut. As Strife staggered back, Myrion punched him again and again. "No slave would talk like that," he said, breath hitching from effort, as he brought his fists together to smash down on Strife's head. "Whoever you are, you're a fraud. And as soon as I tell the guards —"

Strife's forearm, lean with long ropy muscle, slapped Myrion's fists aside, and his other fist hammered Myrion's chest just below the breastbone, stealing his breath. As he stumbled, Strife caught him by the shoulder and leaned in.

"And people say *I* talk too much," he said, and then his other hand came in with a blow Myrion saw coming but couldn't do anything about, and the world exploded into light and then darkness.

As the world slid away, he heard the Qunari laugh.

***

The Qunari guards had beaten Strife afterward, of course, but it had been a perfunctory beating, to make sure he knew that there'd be more of the same if he talked back or caused more trouble. Later, the guards dragged him and the unconscious Myrion, still chained to him at the ankle, to a makeshift shelter where the prisoners were secured for the night.

The guards came around with bowls filled with some sort of savory porridge, and Strife shoveled it into his mouth. Beside him, Myrion, finally awake, sniffed at it and grimaced.

"Not up to your fancy tastes?" Strife asked, shaking his head.

"Shut up." Myrion glared at him and then took a bite, chewing more than he needed to with a sour look on his face.

"That's the spirit. Eat hearty. You've got a full day's work ahead of you."

The shelter was open on one side to let what passed for a breeze flow through and cool down the prisoners. Strife had a good view of the forest in the distance, the greens of the mossy trunks and heavy leaves darkened to black in the dim gray starlight.

As he ate, a pale white form separated itself from the forest. It was a halla, antlers curling out like Tevinter sabers. It scented the air, one foreleg raised. When it saw Strife looking at it, the halla tapped the ground slowly and deliberately three times.

Strife shook his head and tapped his leg twice.

The halla ducked its head down. Then it turned back into the forest, gone as quickly as it had arrived.

"What was that?"

Strife looked over at Myrion, whose eyes were narrowed in thought. "What was what?"

"That deer. It was like you talked to it."

"Don't be silly," Strife said, smiling and cracking his knuckles. "It was a deer. I shooed it off, so it wouldn't end up in the porridge."

"No, those white ones are . . ." Myrion thought. "Halla. That's what the Dalish elves use to pull their wagons."

"Is it?" Strife downed another spoonful of the porridge. It wasn't bad, once you started thinking of it as lukewarm stew after your brothers had already gotten the good parts.

"You know that's what it was." Myrion glared. "Is that what you are? One of those Dalish bandits?"

"Seems to me," Strife murmured, putting his bowl down, "if I were chained to one of those Dalish elves, the ones willing to kill any shem who looks at them wrong, I'd watch my mouth, because that Dalish elf might be here secretly, and he'd have to kill anyone who gave him away."

Myrion opened his mouth, and then looked up guiltily as the guard stopped in front of them.

"Bowl," said the guard, a thick Qunari warrior who seemed to be made of scar tissue and knee-skin. "Now."

Myrion looked at Strife. Strife raised an eyebrow, curling one hand into a fist where Myrion couldn't see.

Myrion passed the bowl to the guard. "Thank you for supper."

Strife did the same, head down to hide his grin.

When the guard had moved to the next chained pair, he looked at Myrion. "'Thank you for supper'? That how the slaves talked in your manor?"

"I didn't—" Myrion caught himself, then glowered. "Threaten me again, and you'll find my tone quite different."

"Don't worry." Strife lay back on his pallet, using his arm as a makeshift pillow. "Tomorrow, I'll be away from here, and you'll be chained to someone new."

"Is that so?" Myrion asked. Strife wasn't sure whether the man sounded angry or curious. Maybe both.

"You'll see."

He shut his eyes and went to sleep with the ease of long practice sleeping in uncomfortable places.

The Qunari came early in the morning to wake them all, and Strife pulled himself up, as did Myrion, who was groaning and whining exactly like a good slave wouldn't. Whatever he'd been before the Qunari conquered Ventus, it hadn't involved getting up early.

"I must speak to Bas-taar," Strife said when the guard started to unchain them from the main chain-line. "There is other work I should be doing."

The guard, a burly Qunari whose face looked like something a Tevinter noble saved for his dogs at the end of the day, stared down at Strife. "You cut the trees." His hand moved slowly to the cudgel at his waist.

Strife nodded. "Yes, but Bas-taar will want me to do something else when I speak with him."

Myrion was shifting nervously beside him. The little man would already be trotting off with an ax he didn't know how to use, ready to make some new blisters.

So would Strife, if he'd been thirty years younger, looking up at a human guard. Hurry along so the guards didn't notice you, and maybe you'd get through the day without trouble.

Vir Bor'assan, Strife thought, keeping his eyes on the guard. It was one of the first things the Dalish had taught him. *The Way of the Bow: as*

the sapling bends, so must you. In yielding, find resilience; in pliancy, find strength.

The guard finally looked away. "Come," he muttered, and walked off.

Strife moved to keep up, and Myrion, with a muttered oath, also hurried to keep pace. "What are you doing?" the human muttered as they walked across the beach toward the Qunari command tent.

"Don't worry. In a few minutes, it won't be your problem."

Bas-taar looked up from papers as the guard came in. When he saw Strife and Myrion, the smile he gave made Strife think of cracking knuckles. "What do the *bas* need?"

Strife bowed. "I am trained in alchemy. I worked with another elf. He called himself Thantiel."

Bas-taar snorted, the gold paint on his face wrinkling, but he seemed interested despite himself. "We do not know the names of the *bas*."

"He has marks upon his face." Strife touched his cheeks. "Like branches. He is also trained in alchemy. Together, we could help with more than cutting down trees."

"Ahh." Bas-taar smiled, slow and easy. "I know this *bas*. He also talked too much."

Bend but never break, Strife remembered. "Put me with him, then," he said, "and I will see to it that he is quiet."

Bas-taar looked at the guard and said something in the Qunari language. He turned to Strife. "You will go to the other elf now. You will work as he does." His smile curved like a sword built for chopping. "The Qun is generous in fulfilling such requests."

Strife ducked his head. "My thanks, Bas-taard." Myrion's elbow dug into his side, but Myrion was a whiny little man who wouldn't be Strife's problem for much longer.

The guard led them across the beach toward another large tent. Strife walked easily, watching as the other prisoners set to work with axes. The dull thumps of axes cutting into wood were a little drumbeat under the constant foamy song of the ocean waves crashing against the shore.

"I don't like this," Myrion muttered beside him. "The Qunari don't change their minds like that. I took classes in this. They think everyone is born to do a certain job, and they don't just let you change your mind because you complain about it."

"Wishing you'd let them know you were a scribe and not a laborer?" Strife asked.

"Listen, you knife-eared idiot, you're causing trouble, and I don't want to get caught in it, too!"

"In a few minutes, we'll be chained to different people, and you'll never have to worry about me again," Strife said.

In a few minutes, he'd be with Thantiel, who'd signaled that he'd gotten his hands on the Qunari plans right after Ventus had fallen. Then he and Thantiel would be off into the woods, waiting for a certain halla to show up and guide them to safety, and a few hours after that, he'd be singing old elven songs around a campfire, with Thantiel warbling on the high notes and Irelin telling him that his accent was still terrible after all these years. They would laugh about the Qunari and about idiot Tevinter men who'd never learned to stand up for themselves with blood magic and slaves to support them, and Strife would turn the shackles into a lovely decoration on his quiver.

The guard opened the flap to the tent, and Strife and Myrion stepped inside, their chain clanking between them.

The smell hit Strife first, hot lye and sweaty steam, and as his eyes adjusted, he realized that it was the stink of laundry. Robed figures were dumping dirty clothes into vats and stirring the clothes around.

Not the alchemists, then, Strife realized. Their robes were different from the prisoner's uniform he'd gotten, and they didn't match each other, either. Some robes were slim, while others hid the figures inside them behind voluminous folds. If they hadn't been mindlessly beating the clothes, Strife would have thought the prisoners were Chantry priests.

"Where's Thantiel?" Strife asked the guard, stepping into the room. Enclosed like this, it would be even easier for the two of them to escape once the guard left. Strife looked around, squinting against the acrid steam, and saw a tall slim figure who wasn't wearing robes. "Thant! That you?"

Thantiel didn't answer, and Strife went to him, Myrion trotting behind with awkward, jittery steps. "Wait," the human was saying, "wait, this isn't right . . ."

Strife caught Thantiel's shoulder and turned him around.

The eyes, the bright blue eyes of an elf who had never known the pain and indignity of living in an alienage, met Strife's stare. They were dull and glassy and devoid of recognition. Thantiel's mouth hung open, and he swayed in Strife's grasp, a vacant weight. The vallaslin tattooed across

his face, a mark of adulthood for those raised in the Dalish clan, was the only remnant of Strife's friend.

"The robes," Myrion hissed. "These were mages!"

Strife turned and saw another worker, who was dragging a wooden hamper across the sand. Her eyes were flat and empty, just like Thantiel's, but her robe, filthy and sodden as it was, still glittered at the hem with remnants of gold trim.

What did the Qunari do to the mages they took prisoner? Strife tried to remember, and then cursed himself for a fool as a blow cracked across his back and brought him to his knees.

"This bas also spoke too much," said the guard with a gristly smile, now standing before Strife. He held up a bottle filled with viscous brown liquid. "Now he is quiet. You work with him? You will be quiet, too." A meaty hand clapped down on Strife's shoulder. Myrion tried to pull away, and the guard backhanded him, sending the man to the ground with a bloody nose.

"Thant! Help me!" Strife tried to stand, and the guard delivered a blow that set the world spinning and rattled Strife's teeth. A few feet away, Thantiel stood impassively, watching without interest as the guard pried Strife's mouth open.

The Qunari gave mages something, some kind of poison that left them like walking corpses.

He tried to knock the bottle away, but the guard's grip was like a vise. Another blow rocked Strife's head, and he gasped despite himself, and then the bottle pressed against his lips, and bitter liquid flooded his mouth.

A thunderclap shook the room, and Strife collapsed as the guard let go. He spat the liquid to the floor, coughing and shaking his head, and then looked up.

The guard lay on the ground, smoke wafting from a hole in his chest.

Beside Strife, Myrion stood with one hand pointed at the guard. Little tendrils of lightning curled around his shaking fingers.

Myrion looked down at him. "Do you know how hard I tried to hide?"

Strife opened his mouth, and then Myrion's fist rocked his jaw and left him seeing stars.

"This is your fault!" Myrion snarled, and Strife felt hands close around his throat.

***

The stupid knife-ear had nearly gotten Myrion killed. The elf wasn't dead yet, but as good as. Myrion's fingers dug into the older man's throat, and his vision pounded red. Blood from his nose dripped down his shirt and onto the sandy ground.

The knife-ear was saying something. Trying to, anyway, hands clutching at Myrion's wrists.

"Can you break the shackles?" the elf gasped, and Myrion's fingers clenched even harder in his anger.

"If I could break the shackles, do you think I'd still be here?"

"Then . . ." The elf's voice was a ragged gasp. *"I hope you're ready to drag my body as you escape."*

Myrion froze.

A moment later, he snatched his hands back, and Strife hunched over, coughing.

"What do you mean, escape?" he asked.

Strife coughed a bit more, then smiled up at Myrion, his face still red. "How would you like to see the sights of Arlathan Forest?"

Everyone knew Arlathan Forest was haunted, wracked by old elven magic that lingered centuries later, dangerous and uncontrolled. A monument to the elves' lack of discipline, an old magister had once told Myrion. Myrion had thought it sounded sad.

But today, it might mean freedom. Myrion narrowed his eyes, wiping the blood from his face. His nose had finally stopped bleeding. "You can get us away from the Qunari?"

Strife's grin showed some teeth. "I can give you a better chance than you've got standing here." He stood and stepped toward the other elf, who still stood vacant-eyed and impassive before them. Myrion followed as Strife grabbed the elf's shoulder. "Thant. Thant, it's me!" He slapped the elf's cheek. "Come on!"

"It's no use." Myrion saw the naked pain in Strife's face and looked away. "The Qunari drug, it's called *qamek*. The Magisterium warned us about it. With as much as they've given them . . . I don't think they're ever coming back." There'd been a pamphlet about it. He'd read it over lunch before an afternoon playing wisp-darts with friends. Jasecca had said a nice empty mind sounded like a welcome relief after dealing with warding rituals all summer. Her sun-kissed skin had gleamed, her robes

trimmed to leave her arms bare except for twining serpent bracelets that glittered in the light.

One of the laundry workers wore robes that left the arms bare. Her back was to him, but Myrion saw little white lines against tan skin where bracelets would have sat on her arms. He refused to look at her face. "If you've got a plan, we need to go *now*."

Something in his voice got through to the elf, and Strife looked over, nodded, and then pulled the other elf close. "Same clothes. Maybe . . ." He pulled the elf's tunic open, pawed through it.

"What are you doing?" Myrion demanded. "Do you *want* to end up a mindless husk?"

"Thantiel snuck into your city to get information about the Qunari invasion. He said he'd got hold of their plan." Strife pulled his hand back with a small folded square of paper. "Right, Thant. I'll carry it for you." He sighed, then reached up with both hands and cupped his friend's head and chin. "No cure, you said? No coming back?"

"Not when they're like this. I'm sorry."

"Then I can at least give him peace." Strife sighed, and then twisted sharply. Myrion heard a crack. "Andruil guide your way, Thant," he murmured as he lowered his friend's body to the ground. Then he stood and turned to Myrion, his face grim. "If you want to live, magister, you'll do as I do."

"If not for me, you'd be helping with the laundry right now," Myrion snapped.

Strife knelt by the guard. "No key." He pulled at the guard's ax, then let it drop with a wince and grabbed the cudgel instead. "Bow would've been too much to ask for." He stood. "Right. Back of the tent."

They shuffled over. Heading toward the tent just minutes ago, they had found a kind of rhythm. Now the chain jerked and danced between them, hitching their steps. Strife pulled up the tent flap, waving impatiently. "Under."

Myrion ducked down and stepped under, out onto the sandy beach. Strife followed, blinking at the cool clear air. On one side, Myrion saw the ocean, waves frothing with a promise of sucking undertow. On the other, the impenetrable foliage of Arlathan Forest, with prisoners chopping ineffectually at its edges. "What now?" Myrion asked.

"Now we get to the forest," Strife said, "and meet my clan." He started walking.

Myrion fell in beside him, matching the elf's stride on a path behind the rows of working tents running parallel to the shore. "So you *are* Dalish."

"Guess we were both hiding something, magister," Strife said with a bitter chuckle.

"Why don't you have the tattoos?" Myrion asked. "Like your friend back in the tent?"

Strife paused and looked back at the tent with a glare that promised violence. "Thant was a good man. He deserved better than the Qunari gave him."

So had Jasecca, Myrion mused, thinking of the figure back in the tent whose face he hadn't looked at. No one deserved to be a prisoner in their own mind, shackled by Qunari drugs just like the mages rendered Tranquil in the south, denied even a quick death.

It was an awful effort without a staff, pulling little wisps of magic into order. He mouthed an old meditation chant that he'd learned at university, guiding the magic with his will, until it was ready, scratching at the edge of the barrier between the mortal world and the world of spirits, and then, sweating, he opened the path and let the energy through.

A ball of fire rolled wetly across the top of the tent, sooty flame curling out as the leather caught. The cries of alarm were immediate from the Qunari command tents. If anyone inside the laundry tent cried out, Myrion didn't hear it.

"What in Andruil's name did you do?" Strife shouted.

Myrion met his look. "I gave everyone in that tent a merciful end, like you did for your friend."

"You idiot!" Strife grabbed him by the front of the tunic. "They might not have noticed we were gone for an hour! Now they'll be on our heels!"

Myrion shoved Strife away. "You're saying we should have left them like that?"

"I'm saying you shouldn't have *started a big fire*," Strife growled. "Come on!" He turned and started to run.

Myrion tried to follow, and then, tangled in the chain he'd forgotten was there, he tripped and fell to the sand. His hands and forearms stung from the impact, and the salty air nipped at his eyes. Using magic always left him feeling sensitive, as though everything were just a bit sharper.

"On your feet, magister!" Strife pulled on his shoulder, and Myrion let himself be dragged up.

"Not a magister, you damned knife-ear," he muttered, and then they were running.

"Inside foot, outside, inside, outside," Strife muttered beside him. "Find the rhythm, if you want to make it to the trees!"

Myrion tried to find the rhythm, his blood pounding in his ears louder than the surf as they ran. The sand pulled at his sandals, and around him shouts of alarm came from both the Qunari and the prisoners. Myrion kept running, looking at his feet next to Strife's.

The sand turned to scrubby grass beneath his sandals, and Myrion heard a shout from his right, past Strife. He looked up to see one of the guards turning toward them: a thick-bodied Qunari, short for their race, whose horns had been replaced with little dragon's-head caps.

Strife caught the guard in the face with the stolen cudgel, kicked him in the knee, and then smashed the cudgel across the back of his head.

He might have done more, but Myrion had still been running, and a moment later, the chain snapped taut between them with a painful wrench that sent Myrion face-first to the turf again.

"Idiot mage!" Strife hissed. He'd ended up on his back and rolled now to his feet, yanking the chain back with another tug on Myrion's leg.

"You didn't say we were stopping!" Myrion got to his hands and knees, then pushed himself up, yanking on the chain as well.

"I didn't think I had to! Inside foot, *go!*" Strife jerked into a run, and Myrion clumsily matched his stride. The chain between them hissed through the grass, jerking when it hit twigs.

Then the forest was before them, dark angry trees looming overhead as if daring Myrion to approach. He stumbled, and Strife grabbed his shoulder and pulled him into the forest proper.

The darkness was sudden and blinding after the morning light on the beach. The air reeked of dead leaves and old dirt, and branches slashed at Myrion's face and arms as he followed alongside the elf. His lungs burned.

They both jerked as the chain snagged on a root. Myrion staggered into a tree to catch himself, then slid down the mossy trunk to his knees. Strife snarled and turned back, tugging at the chain.

Myrion looked up at a flash of movement before him. The snowy-white deer was there, sliding out from between two trunks ahead of

them. No, not a deer, a halla; that was what the Dalish called them.

The halla looked at Myrion, his breath heaving and his leg throbbing from the shackle, and then at Strife.

Then, with a shimmering sparkle of magic, the halla slid into the form of a young elven woman.

She was thin and her features were more striking than pretty, her hair cut short and freckles on her face blurring into the Dalish tattoo across her forehead. She wore supple leather trimmed with fur, and she held a bow in one hand, along with a quiver of arrows.

"I brought you a bow," she said to Strife. "You brought me a magister."

"Yes, your gift is better. You win." Strife tugged on the chain.

"Where's Thant?" She waved a hand, and the root slid back into the soil, leaving the chain free.

"The Antaam used the mind-poison on him." Strife sighed, and after a glance at Myrion, added, "All we could give him was a merciful end."

"The Antaam will pay." The woman's voice was quiet, but Myrion felt the air shudder at her anger.

"I'm not a magister," he said. "I am a mage, though. My name is Myrion."

"No key?" she asked. Myrion blinked, then realized she was looking at the shackles.

"None," said Strife. "I don't suppose your magic can get us loose?"

The elven woman squinted. The tattoo on her face made her look like she was glaring, or maybe she *was* glaring. "No. You could cut the magister's foot off. Then you'd only have the chain to worry about."

"I'm not a magister, you stupid knife—" Myrion broke off as Strife cuffed him on the back of the head.

"Play nice, Irelin," Strife said to the elf, smiling. "He keeps the foot for now."

"I can hide your trail," the woman, apparently Irelin, said.

"No. You need to go." Strife pulled out the paper he'd gotten from his friend's tunic and passed it to Irelin. "The Qunari are moving into Rivain. You need to get word to the clans before they land."

Irelin looked at Myrion with her maybe-glare, then back to Strife. "I can be there and back by midnight. Can you stay ahead of the Qunari until then?"

"In this forest?" With a smile, Strife patted the nearest tree trunk. "I've no doubt Myrion and I will lose them. *Dareth shiral*, lass. Bring back a lockpick if you've a mind to."

"Dareth shiral." Irelin turned to glare at Myrion. "I liked Thant. I like Strife, too. If the Qunari get him because of you, you'll lose more than a foot."

For a moment, Irelin reminded him of the old mage who had trained him in combat magic back in university. None of his barriers had been good enough, and his firebolts had been "perfunctory." Her face was scarred from fighting with the Qunari, making her scowl even worse when she ordered Myrion to stay late for more practice. He had hated her with a burning passion until the day he saw her sitting by the fountain. She was crying, holding a letter whose wax seal marked it as coming from the front lines of the war. He had not *liked* her after that, exactly, but he had stopped complaining about staying late for more practice.

Myrion pushed himself back to his feet. His legs were shaky and his breath was only now coming back, but he met the elf woman's glare. "If the Qunari get him, it means I'm already dead, so your threats are empty. Are you going to get moving, or are you going to stay here and waste time glaring at the *shem*?"

She wasted another moment glaring at the *shem*, and then the air around her shimmered with magic. A moment later, a falcon hung in the air where she had stood, and with a quick beat of its wings, it was darting through the forest and up through the branches and away.

"That went well," Strife said after a moment. He looked back, and Myrion heard shouting behind them. "Ready to run? Now, inside foot, outside, inside, outside . . ."

***

The Antaam had sent the Huntmaster to Bas-taar just days ago, after the fall of Ventus. Bas-taar did not think he needed a huntmaster. He worked the *bas* like the clumsy, lazy animals they were, so that even those who did try to flee were too weak to make it far. The Huntmaster had offered no further explanation with the written order, and Bas-taar had assumed it was another small sign of disorganization in the invasion.

Usually the other Qunari were there to support the Antaam—the workers crafting the gear and managing supplies, the Tamassran priests making sure the Antaam were healthy in mind as in body, the Ben-Hassrath spies scouting behind enemy lines and removing any Antaam who might forsake their training and abandon the Qun. This time, the Antaam had attacked the *bas* of the south without the blessing of the other Qunari, and little things were not working as well as they should. Supplies were late. Ships were not in good repair.

As he walked out onto the beach where the Huntmaster stood, Bas-taar growled to himself at the treachery of the other Qunari. Had they been here to support the Antaam in bringing death to the *bas* of the south, the two prisoners would not have escaped. Bas-taar would find a prisoner to beat later.

The Huntmaster carried a bow that stood as tall as a human, as well as a wicked spear longer than the Huntmaster himself. He had an arrow nocked in the bow now. Bas-taar did not see at first what the Huntmaster was aiming at, and then, squinting down the beach, he saw a black gull pecking at a dead crab.

The Huntmaster held his great bow at full draw as Bas-taar approached. While Bas-taar ordinarily thought little of scouts and hunters, he had to admit that holding such a bow drawn for so long was an impressive feat.

Still . . . "Will you kill it?" he asked in the proper language of the Qun as he came up behind the other Qunari.

For a moment, the Huntmaster did not respond. Then, without turning, he said, "It is no threat. The path of the Qun does not call for needless violence."

"Your arrow is already nocked," Bas-taar pointed out. "The path of Qun does not call for wasted effort. Why draw back your bow if not to use it?"

For a long moment, the Huntmaster looked at the black gull in the distance. "I wished to know whether I could strike a target from such a distance."

Slowly, with perfect control of his movements, he relaxed the bow and returned the arrow to its quiver.

Bas-taar glowered at the Huntmaster. This is why he thought less of Antaam who did not fight on the front lines. Even the black-and-white-striped vitaar that painted the Huntmaster's face was drawn to symbolize

sight, *finding*, rather than battle and power, as befitted the Antaam. "And now?"

The Huntmaster smiled faintly. "Now I know."

"You know nothing," Bas-taar snapped. "You did not kill the gull!"

"To not know something is foolishness," the Huntmaster said. "To know by doing is experience. To know without needing to do is wisdom."

It was one of the sayings of the Qun, one of the talky lessons Bas-taar had never cared for. The parts about obeying orders and non-followers of the Qun getting ground into dust had always been his favorites. "This wastes our time, and you are needed," he said to the Huntmaster, stifling a growl. "Two prisoners escaped. One may be a mage."

"I thought you killed all the mages in Ventus," the Huntmaster said, "even those who surrendered and did not fight." The words held an edge.

"Without the Ben-Hassrath to interrogate the mages and discern which ones could be trusted, we had no choice but to administer *qamek* to all of them." Bas-taar smiled. That at least was a benefit of the Antaam acting alone. No Ben-Hassrath to say that *no, this mage should live, do not hurt them more than necessary*. "This one hid his nature and acted as a normal *bas*."

"How much *qamek* did you give the mages?" The Huntmaster's voice was calm now, a mountain lake on a windless day.

"We have no Ben-Hassrath to measure it for us," Bas-taar said with a hard smile, "so we gave them a heavy dose, to be sure. None of the *saarebas* or the other troublesome prisoners will ever come back to their minds." Another benefit of no Ben-Hassrath. They always preferred halfway measures, shackling a man's mind when it was so much easier to simply break it.

"I had heard of your work in Ventus, and now I see that it is true." The Huntmaster nodded to Bas-taar in respect, one follower of the Qun who knew the truth of another. "I will follow the fleeing prisoners. Your twelve most-devoted warriors will come with me."

"My twelve most-devoted warriors and me," Bas-taar corrected, and smiled broadly. "The *bas* will learn what it means to disobey me."

"It shall be done as you order," the Huntmaster said with a small nod.

And though the Huntmaster might have been weak by the standards of the Antaam, a hunter and tracker rather than a *real* warrior, Bas-taar saw that the other Qunari had a little smile on his face as well.

Behind him, far in the distance, the gull shrieked once and then flew away.

* * *

Strife moved through the forest, his steps quick and assured. Beside him, or more often *behind* him, the idiot magister huffed and thrashed and stepped on every damned dry leaf the forest saw fit to put before them.

There were other noises, too, sibilant whispers that curled through the branches overhead, tiny crackling breaths of something huge just out of view. Arlathan was like that. Strife had once called it haunted. Irelin had said that the spirits remembered what once had been.

Up ahead, something moved on a tree branch, silhouetted against the sunlight so that he couldn't see it, only the suggestion of a shape. Strife pulled an arrow from his quiver and raised his bow without slowing his stride. Whatever it was slid back into the shadows.

"Trouble?" Myrion gasped behind him.

Strife slid his arrow back into the quiver. "Don't let it worry you."

"Concerned for my feelings, knife-ear?"

"Concerned for the spirits of the forest that can feel our moods," Strife snapped. "*I* know I belong here, so they leave me alone. With all your fear, *you* might as well be leaving a trail of fresh blood to bring something dangerous our way. So don't let it worry you. *Magister*."

Myrion huffed. "I've been guarding my thoughts from demons since I was fourteen years old. Took a test on it and everything. A desire demon took the form of a boy I liked."

"The spirits of Arlathan are older and more powerful than the little wisps your teachers summoned to test you. I just hope you're better with spirits than you are with the forest."

"I'm better with *anything* than I am with the forest." Myrion glared at the bushes. "I managed to get lost in the gardens of Minrathous once. Fell into an ornamental pond."

"I couldn't have ended up chained to a magister who likes hiking?" Strife let it go. The man was a mage. If he said he could deal with the demons, Strife had to trust that, at least.

They kept going. Beside Strife, slow but steady, the mage kept moving, muttering something under his breath in a low chant.

Strife thought it was magic, until he caught the words in time with their each step. "Inside, outside, inside, outside . . ."

When the shafts of sunlight snaking down through gaps in the leafy ceiling told him it was midafternoon, Strife raised a hand and stopped. Myrion staggered forward a few more steps, yanking against the shackle on Strife's left leg, and then got the message and sagged against a tree, gasping for air like *he'd* been the one half strangled a few hours ago.

"Have they given up?" the mage asked, panting.

"I can't very well tell with you wheezing over there, can I?" Strife snapped. "I take it you let your slaves do most of the running?"

Myrion made a rude gesture and closed his eyes. After a moment, his breathing slowed.

Strife shut his eyes as well and listened.

The leaves shifted in the wind. Off in the distance, something chased its prey on too many legs. A bird pecked at the bark of a nearby tree, hunting for bugs.

And behind that, the clank of metal.

"Ghilan'nain guide my steps," Strife murmured, and then looked down to Myrion. "Break's over, magister. Time to climb."

"Climb?" The mage looked at him blankly.

"The Qunari are behind us." Strife strode to a large tree with low-hanging branches, pausing so that Myrion could catch up. "I need a better vantage point to know whether they're stumbling around blind or on our trail. So . . ." He grabbed a branch and pulled, catching the ridged bark beneath the slippery moss with an expertise born of long practice and bringing himself up onto the branch with a smooth movement. "Climb."

The mage followed, ungainly and awkward. Strife took it slow, and still had to descend a bit and lower his own leg a few times so that the mage could keep up. It took them several minutes to reach the upper branches, a climb Strife could normally have made in seconds. The mage's clothing was torn and littered with twigs by the time he made it.

It was worth it for the view, though. Here in the highest branches, Strife could see the trees below, and off in the distance—not far *enough*, still—the forest's edge and the misty clouds that marked the ocean.

And before that, glinting through the branches, the shine of metal in the trees.

It was a straight damned line between him and the edge of the forest.

"Blast." Strife eased back down, and Myrion followed, his fingers scrabbling at the moss. "They've got a tracker. Their huntmaster must be worth his name."

"You told Irelin you could lose them," the mage said with an accusatory note. He slipped a little, and dropped hard onto the next branch. The chain pulled taut between them, and Strife grunted and dropped down as well.

"Well, I didn't know their huntmaster was any good, now, did I?" he muttered back. He slid nimbly down to the next branch and then dropped to the ground. This time, the chain yanked on Myrion's leg, and he fell from his branch and landed hard in the mud.

"Idiot." The mage's heart didn't seem to be in it, though. "What now?"

"Vir Assan," Strife said. "The Way of the Arrow. *Be swift and silent, strike true, and do not waver*. It's a hunter's saying, but in this case, we're the prey. There's a river a few hours away. We'll lose the Huntmaster there."

Myrion pushed himself back to his feet. "Ready when you are, knife-ear."

Strife started up again. *Inside, outside, inside, outside* . . . He heard the mage still muttering it under his breath with each step. He was slow, but he didn't give up. The chain danced between them, jingling with every step.

"What's that saying from?" he gasped a while later. "The bit with the arrow?"

"Vir Tanadahl." A wall of heavy foliage blocked the path ahead, and Strife gestured for them to head left. "The Way of Three Trees. Wisdom passed down from the goddess Andruil."

"Right, the elven gods." Myrion smirked. "Lot of good they did you."

Strife shot him a glare. "If we get out of here alive, it'll be because of what Andruil taught my people." Myrion opened his mouth to fire something back, and Strife shouldered the mage into a tree. The man smeared the moss as he staggered against it, which would make tracking them easier, but the Huntmaster had already tracked them easily enough. "Be careful how you speak of the Lady of the Hunt while you stand in her forest."

Myrion glared and shoved him back. "Fine. That must be why the elven empire is the greatest in the world today." As Strife's hands

clenched into fists, Myrion raised a hand, and his fingers crackled with lightning. "Oh, wait. *Tevinter* overthrew the elves, established the largest empire in the known world, and held off the savage Qunari for centuries because we know how to *wield* power instead of letting it run wild in a damned haunted forest."

Strife laughed. "You did it on the backs of slaves, *shem. Elven* slaves." He wanted to punch the glare off the mage's face, but he leaned in instead. "And the Qunari are stomping all over your great empire as we speak." He stepped back, then turned and started walking, yanking on the chain. "Come on. Break's over."

They moved in silence after that.

It was nearing sundown by the time they reached the river. It was about fifty paces across, dark water foaming white around the rocks, and shallow enough that they could walk instead of swimming if they were smart about it.

"Come on." He pointed at a bit of frothing white. "We use the rocks under there."

Myrion pointed at a chain of rocks a bit upstream. "Why not there?"

"Because the Huntmaster's behind us." Strife started moving, and the mage came along rather than trip both of them up. "Walk on the dry rocks, and he'll spot the muddy prints from your sandals. Walk in the water, and it'll erase any marks we leave."

The river wasn't too cold, a small blessing, and Strife picked his way across, moving from stone to stone and keeping them in the shallows as much as possible. When he was halfway across, he changed direction, moving them upstream.

"Why the change?" the mage asked, raising his voice a little over the crash of the water.

"They'll be expecting us to cross directly," Strife answered, "or go downstream, since it's easier." He looked up at the afternoon sky. "Even if this doesn't lose the Huntmaster, it will buy us some time."

"That makes sense." The mage said it warily, like a peace offering.

Strife paused as the chain snagged on a rock. He tugged it free and made his way farther upstream, the mage behind him. When he thought they'd gone far enough, he went a little farther, because moving upstream always *felt* farther than it actually was, and then he looked for a likely spot.

"When we come out of the river," he said, "we need to leave as little trace as possible. Muddy footprints, broken branches—all of that tells them right where to start looking for us again."

"How do we get out without leaving marks?" the mage asked.

Strife squinted. "There." He pointed at a large rock at the edge of the river. "We climb onto that, then hop onto that little one next to it, and from there onto the fallen log." The log didn't even have any moss on it.

"What about our muddy footprints?"

Strife smiled. "I imagine the river's done a better job washing your sandals than the slaves you're used to. We'll leave water, but it should dry off quickly enough in the afternoon sun."

Myrion glared, then looked at where Strife had pointed. "There's sand and mud all around those rocks. One slip, and we'll leave prints even a blind man could track."

"Then I suggest you don't slip," Strife said, and started for the shore.

They reached the large rock, which was orange and flat and hung out over the river like a balcony. Strife hopped up easily enough, at least most of the way, and then fell onto his stomach when the chain went taut. A moment later, Myrion climbed up, huffing.

"Right." Strife got to his feet and offered the mage a hand. "We move together, magister." Myrion took his hand, and Strife pulled him up to his feet. He pointed down at the next rock, a wide speckled one that would be just large enough for the two of them to stand on together. "Ready?"

Myrion grunted, and they jumped.

Strife made it easily enough, and then Myrion landed and bumped into him, and he pinwheeled his arms, standing on one leg on the very edge of the rock and looking down at the wet sand just waiting for him to land and make an enormous mess.

The mage's arm clamped down on his shoulder and hauled him back. "Clumsy oaf!"

"*I'm* the clumsy oaf?" Strife resisted the urge to punch the mage. Instead, he pointed at the fallen log, and the wall of dark forest ahead of them, tantalizingly close. "On three, we jump for that. Try not to wave your arms around this time, magister. One—"

"I'm *not* a magister," Myrion muttered.

"Two. . . ."

Just before Strife would have said "three," an arrow punched into his back.

***

As the elf cried out and fell, Myrion turned, trying not to gloat about not being the clumsy one tripping all over everything in the damned forest for a change. Then he saw the arrow sticking out of the elf's back and also out his *front*, blood already pooling below his ribs on his left side, and then the elf landed in the mud and rolled, and the chain went taut and yanked Myrion off his feet.

He landed on the rock with a jarring impact and, looking up at the sky, saw an arrow flash through where he'd just been standing. Groaning, he sat up.

The Qunari had reached the river a hundred paces downstream. There were at least a dozen. The Huntmaster was the one holding the bow, standing tall and already nocking another arrow. Even at this distance, Myrion recognized his black-and-white-painted face.

Beside him, the Bas-taar's gold-painted face lit up in a savage smile, and he raised a massive ax whose double-bladed head was bigger than a dinner plate and twisted with cruel barbs. "*Bas!*" he shouted. "You run fast, but the Qun leads us to you! The Bas-taar does not lose those in his care!"

An arrow glanced off his rope-knotted armor, and he roared in surprise. Myrion looked over at Strife. The elf was already up, the bow Irelin had give him still thrumming. "Care for that, Bas-taard?!" Strife yelled, his voice steady despite the arrow sticking out of his gut, and then ducked down as the Huntmaster's next arrow buzzed past his head.

"Get behind the log!" Myrion hissed, pulling the magic to him. The magic of the woods was slick and dangerous, heavy one moment and leaping the next. Myrion had cast spells in places where the Veil was thinner before, letting the magic come to him with little resistance, but this was different. Something else lurked at the edge of his awareness. He ignored it for now, focusing the magic.

While the Huntmaster and the Bas-taar held back, the other Qunari were coming up the river, thick swords and large shields held up over their heads.

Myrion released his magic, and a bolt of lightning sizzled from his hands. It wreathed one of the Qunari in crackling tendrils of lightning, and then darted across the water to his comrades, jolting them all into a dance of pain. "For Jasecca," he murmured, letting the anger focus his mind.

Then Strife slammed into him, knocking him down just as the Huntmaster's next arrow hissed past them.

"You mentioned the log," Strife said, his voice tight with pain.

Myrion scrambled to his feet. "Inside, outside . . ." Together, they scrambled over the log and then hunkered down behind it. "How's your back?"

"It won't be what kills me. Break off the arrow anywhere above the fletching, would you?"

Myrion grabbed the arrow, trying to ignore his revulsion at the sight of it sticking out of the elf's back, and snapped it. "Done. Now what?"

"Hang on." Strife took a breath, then reached down to his gut, where the arrowhead protruded. With a quick motion, he pulled it through and out, and then released a ragged breath. "Andruil's tits!"

Myrion was very nearly sick, but if Strife could keep steady after doing that, he could keep steady after watching it. "Should we run?"

Strife threw the broken arrow aside, nocked one of his own, drew back his bow, and fired. One of the Qunari in the river fell, clutching at his throat, and Strife gave a grunt of satisfaction. "I had twenty arrows. I'd rather not die with any left in my quiver."

Myrion nodded and pulled the magic to him again. It was still easy, but the sense of something *else* was stronger this time, something lurking at the edge of the Veil, sensing *him* pulling at the threads of magic. Again he ignored it, and this time, his bolt of lightning sent two of the Qunari soldiers in the river down into the water, their limbs spasming.

Wisp-darts and iced wine. The little pastries they served at the café on the hill overlooking the docks, the ones with honey and nuts baked into them . . . All of that had died with Ventus, and the Qunari would pay.

An arrow sank into the log a handbreadth from his face, and he stared across the river and saw the Huntmaster look directly into his eyes. The Qunari's eyes were cold behind the black-and-white stripes, showing a calculating intelligence as he drew another arrow.

"You are weak, *bas!*" Bas-taar shouted. He was running along the riverbank, waving his ax and smiling his horrible meat-chopping smile. "The Qun will teach you obedience!"

Strife loosed another arrow. This one snagged the rope-knot armor and pinned Bas-taar to a tree. "I've had fifty years to learn obedience, Bas-taard!" he called back, his voice a little ragged now. "And stronger men than you have tried."

Then he grunted in pain as the Huntmaster sent another arrow clean through the log and into his arm.

Myrion raised his hands. If the Veil was thin, it was time to see how much he could really do. He pulled across the Veil, drawing as much power as he could . . .

And the forest roared in anger.

Myrion's spell fizzled into nothingness as a massive form of wood and stone crashed out of the forest. It was as tall as a golem, and it walked on four wooden legs bound to stone feet covered in runes and moss. Its body was stone covered in vines, and two great wooden arms rose up, each ending in a blade of thick metal whose edges glowed with lyrium.

"Dumat's breath," Myrion swore as the thing crashed toward him.

He readied another spell, but Strife's hand slapped his shoulder. "No magic! It's a forest guardian!"

The elf pulled him back, and they both gave ground, stumbling. The chain snagged on a root, and Myrion fell, landing on his back. Beside him, Strife swayed where he stood, but his hands were steady as he held them up before the thing. *"Andaran atish'an! Andaran atish'an*, damn it! This is supposed to work!"

Another arrow sank into the tree beside Myrion, and he glared at the Huntmaster downstream, then back at the forest guardian. "I can't fight it without my magic!"

The Qunari warriors were closing in now. Before long, they'd have Myrion and Strife cut off from any retreat.

"We shouldn't have to fight it at all! *Adaran atish'an!*"

Myrion looked at the Huntmaster, who had another arrow nocked already. "Perhaps we don't have to." He yanked the chain free, grabbed Strife, and pulled him to the left, putting the massive forest guardian between them and the Huntmaster. "Inside, outside, inside, come on, damn it!" Past the guardian, he saw the stripes painted around the Huntmaster's eyes twist as the Qunari glared and lowered his bow.

"Listen, you stupid pile of rocks, I'm not here to fight!" Strife shouted at the guardian, scrambling back to his feet.

The guardian raised a giant blade-arm . . . and then paused as one of the Qunari warriors struck it from behind.

The guardian's reaction was immediate. It stopped, rotated, and turned to the Qunari warrior, whose blade was still raised. It was a big thick blade, large enough to chop a Bronto in half with a single blow.

Unfortunately for the Qunari, the guardian was larger than a Bronto.

The forest guardian's arm-blade slammed down and chopped the soldier in half.

"Good. Kill each other," Myrion muttered, and turned to Strife. He was pale, his eyes glassy. "Come on, knife-ear! You going to give up before I do?"

Strife's eyes focused, and he glared. "Not likely, magister."

Inside foot, outside, inside, they ran.

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Once they could no longer hear the fighting, Strife collapsed so that Myrion could get the arrow out of his arm.

"You're sure I should take it out?" the mage asked.

"I can't shoot with it in, that's for certain." Strife grunted. "*Through* a log. Andruil, that's a strong bow. What I could do with a bow like that . . ." The wounds were clean—seemed clean, anyway—but he'd lost a lot of blood. "Do you know any healing magic?" he asked, rolling onto his stomach.

"A little. I was better with lightning." Myrion pulled the arrow from Strife's arm, and Strife grunted, refusing to let out anything more. He hoped the darkness hid the pain on his face. "I had a friend, Jasecca. She worked with spirits. Once she reattached a man's hand after it had been chopped off."

"She sounds like a powerful mage."

"Not powerful enough." Myrion sighed in the darkness. "I saw her back in the tent."

Strife thought about that for a moment. "Then you gave both her and Thant some peace."

"I . . . She taught me a few tricks," Myrion said, voice quick and businesslike. "Maybe I can close your wounds, at least. Is it safe to use

magic now?"

"The forest guardians are rare. I'd be surprised if there were another within a day's walk." Strife felt a humming warmth seep into his back, and he relaxed a little. "Thank you."

He heard cloth ripping behind him. "I'll see if I can bind it."

"As long as I can still use my bow." How many arrows did he have left? Eighteen? Nineteen, maybe. "How's the arrow you pulled out? Still usable?"

"Would you like a scented pillow to lie on as well?" Myrion wrapped the makeshift bandage around Strife's stomach, looping it under his arm.

"That's more *your* style, magister." Strife winced as the bandage tugged tight. "You're not bad at this. Had to bind up your slaves after some blood ritual?"

"I don't even own slaves, you knife-eared idiot."

Strife turned, raising an eyebrow. "What kind of magister did I end up shackled to?"

"I'm not a magister!" Myrion glared, his eyebrows about the only thing Strife could make out in the darkness, then sighed and shook his head. "Magisters come from important families! My family were slaves. I only became a citizen because after my magic came, the owner of the factory where we worked adopted me into his family." He swallowed. "I'm nobody. You know the glowing lamps in the streets of Ventus? I light those with magic. That's my job."

Strife stretched carefully. He'd be able to shoot. "Can I tell you a secret?" He got back to his feet and found them steady beneath him again. "I grew up in an alienage in Starkhaven."

"I thought you were Dalish," Myrion said.

"I had a big mouth, and it got me in trouble," Strife said, smiling. "Hard to believe, I know. I hit a guard who was beating elven children, and he came back with more guards, and I ended up living in the woods. The Dalish found me and let me join up with them. I've picked up what I can from them, but . . ."

Myrion started to laugh. "You're nobody, too."

Strife grinned. "Well, we've only a few hours left, and I've got more than a dozen arrows in my quiver." He looked at the darkened sky. "The Qunari are close behind us. It's probably too much to hope that the guardian kills them all."

Myrion sighed. “Your friend said she’d be back by midnight. You think we can stay ahead of them for that long?”

“I don’t know,” Strife admitted. “With my injuries, and your . . .”

“Complete ineptitude with all things related to the damned forest?” Myrion finished.

Strife laughed. “Lack of familiarity, let’s say.” He squinted, then continued soberly, “No. We’ll manage for a few hours, but they’re going to catch us.”

“Well, then.” Myrion offered him a hand. “Let’s make them regret it.”

***

When the fourth Qunari guard fell under the forest guardian’s blades, the Huntmaster decided it was time to act.

As Bas-taar and his guards hacked at the thing, the Huntmaster put away his bow and readied his long spear.

He stepped forward, feet light on the ground, pace unhurried, and watched as the forest guardian moved. Its blades swung swiftly, but with a regular pattern, and he paused for a moment, waited . . .

His spear snaked through the whirling blades and struck the creature where its neck would be if it had one, the broad point punching through the stone.

The guardian staggered, and Bas-taar and his guards hacked at the creature’s legs as it turned to the Huntmaster, its blades flashing red in the sunset light.

He stepped to one side, and a blade hissed past. A tiny movement of his spear sent another blade to the side harmlessly. Then he struck again, lunging in with the full force of his weight behind his thrust.

His spear punched through the hole left by his first strike, and the guardian shuddered. Whatever magic inside the creature that gave it life, his spear had struck it, and the guardian collapsed, arm-blades still twitching. The idiot guards kept hacking at them.

“Enough!” the Huntmaster snapped.

“We must ensure the creature is destroyed!” Bas-taar yelled, bringing his great blade down and shearing off one of the blades.

The Huntmaster stalked forward and grabbed Bas-taar by the shoulder. “We would not have *needed* to fight it had your guards not

attacked it."

Bas-taar pulled free from the Huntmaster's grip. "It is an unnatural beast!"

"It is a waste of our time." The Huntmaster stared at the log where the mage and the archer had taken cover. "This creature is unknown to the Qun, and our quarry has gone deeper into the forest." He shook his head. "We should let them go."

"What? Why?"

The Huntmaster turned to Bas-taar, whose face was a mask of outrage. "This is a flawed hunt. There is too much we do not understand."

"What do you need to understand?" Bas-taar pointed at where the mage and archer had fled. "They are *bas*. My *bas!* You hunt them, we kill them."

"One is an elf," the Huntmaster corrected. "He treads lightly in this forest, despite being captured in the city. This forest carries old magic we do not know, but the elf knows it. We should come back with more guards, plus Ashaad, who are better in the woods—"

"Vashedan." Bas-taar wiped grime from his great blade. "As long as I command the prison workers, you answer to me!" One of the guards—there were only seven left—stood before him awkwardly, and he turned and snapped, "What?"

"Bas-taar," the guard said hesitantly, "one of our number is too injured to continue. He needs a healer."

The Huntmaster looked at the fallen guard, whose face was a mask of stoic pain, for all the blood that steeped from an ugly stomach wound.

A moment later, Bas-taar's sword cut the injured guard down.

"Not anymore," Bas-taar said. "Now, move!"

He stomped off after the escaped prisoners, the cowed guards in tow.

The Huntmaster looked for a long moment at the dead guard, and then he too followed Bas-taar deeper into the forest.

***

The moon had risen, casting its pale light down through the branches onto the forest floor, when Myrion and Strife heard the crash of footsteps in the distance behind them again.

They had moved as quickly as they could, the now-filthy chain catching on roots and rocks hidden by the darkness, but Strife's injuries slowed him down, and Myrion was too tired to push them any faster. At one point after he'd tripped, Strife had hauled them up, and they'd kept going with arms over each other's shoulders. *Inside foot, outside, inside, outside*.

"When do we turn and fight?" Myrion asked, panting with effort.

"Just a little farther," Strife said. "When you see a dead tree that looks like a pointing hand, head left."

"Got it."

They kept moving. The crash of metal on branches grew louder behind them. If this were open ground, Myrion would probably be able to see them if he turned around. How long before *they* were seen?

Ahead of them through a clearing, a small hill loomed, perhaps ten feet high, mossy and steep. Just in front of it, a fallen tree jutted out, its twisting branches looking uncannily like grasping fingers, with one pointing. "There," Strife muttered, and Myrion turned to the left.

He found himself scrambling up a natural staircase made from tree roots. His sandaled feet slipped on the slick moss, but Strife caught him. In a moment, they were up at the top of the hill Myrion had seen before. They now looked down at the path where they had just come from.

"Now we stand and fight," Strife said.

Myrion nodded. "I doubt the Qunari will see the steps in the darkness."

"Vir Adahlen," Strife said, and grinned, his teeth flashing white in the moonlight. "Way of the Woods. *Receive the gifts of the hunt with mindfulness*. Normally that means the food you catch and eat. In this case, the gift of the hunt is me knowing about this little hill."

"Wisdom from your Lady of the Hunt? Perhaps your gods are good for something." Myrion began to pull the magic to him. It came in fast and strong, with no hint of the danger he'd felt before the forest guardian had come. In his best aristocratic accent, he added, "I'll make a note to have my slaves apologize for doubting her."

Strife laughed beside him and nocked an arrow. "You're not so bad, magister."

"Same to you, knife-ear."

The Qunari came out into the clearing, and Strife let his first arrow fly. It sank into a guard's shoulder, and he howled in pain and staggered

back.

Myrion let his magic loose, and lightning snaked out, catching a pair of Qunari, who collapsed, shaking. An arrow hissed past his cheek, and he ducked back, dimly catching a glimpse of the Huntmaster at the edge of the woods.

Strife already had another arrow out and flying, and then another, his hands blurring as he loosed his shots. Guards came forward, roaring in anger and pain. Some of them fell, but not enough.

Myrion focused, and a cloud wreathed in lightning flickered into existence at the base of the hill. The Qunari inside cried out as tendrils of light coiled around them, and Strife sent another tumbling to the ground, an arrow in his throat.

Then a meaty hand came over the lip of the hilltop, just inches from Myrion's face. He leaped back in surprise, then staggered as a jagged impact slammed into him, and he looked down to see blood seeping from his right arm, where an arrow had grazed him.

The hand pulled, and Bas-taar came up over the edge. In his other hand, he held his massive ax. *"Bas!"* he roared, smiling savagely, and ripped Strife's bow from his grasp with a backhanded blow that left Strife on the ground, stunned or worse. "You led us a good chase, but now you see that none escape the Antaam!"

It was done. Myrion kneeled down to Strife, who was curled up and unmoving. He grabbed the elf's hand. Now standing before them, Bas-taar was laughing, and the other Qunari in the clearing were starting to climb.

Then Strife, still down, squeezed Myrion's hand once.

The pain in his arm made Myrion queasy, but he held on. "Stupid ox-man," he snapped, rising slowly to his feet, "you cannot kill me! Look at me!" He raised his uninjured arm, sneering in the moonlight with an arrogance to match Bas-taar's. "How many of your guards did we kill? Do you know what you did when you chained us together, Bas-taard?"

Bas-taar brought his ax up under Myrion's chin. "What is that, little *bas?*"

"You taught us to work as one," Myrion said, and then added, *"Inside foot!"* and kicked out as Strife did the same.

The shackle that bound Myrion's leg to Strife's caught Bas-taar just above the ankles, and the big Qunari crashed to the ground with Myrion beneath him, his ax falling away into the darkness. Myrion pushed and

Strife kicked, and Bas-taar slipped, rolling onto his back as he tried to halt his slide down into the clearing.

"Now! The chain!" Strife yelled, and as Bas-taar slid off Myrion, Strife leaped over, coming down on the other side and pulling the chain across Bas-taar's neck. "Pull!"

Myrion heaved as Bas-taar's weight tore at his shackled leg. The giant Qunari had his hands up, grasping at the chain around his throat, and Myrion saw his legs kicking freely as he dangled over the hilltop's edge.

But it wasn't going to be enough.

Myrion's cloud of lightning had faded away, and other Qunari were already climbing up. They would free their commander and kill him.

Myrion scrabbled at the soft earth to keep Bas-taar's weight from pulling him over the edge. All his and Strife's work, all their pain, and it had been for nothing.

Bas-taar gave a strangled shout, clawing at the soft dirt with one hand and the chain around his throat with the other.

A pair of Qunari reached the top of the hill, pulling themselves up. They towered over Myrion, their axes shining in the moonlight like bones.

Then a snowy white owl drifted overhead, a ghostly form in the moonlight.

It landed between Myrion and Strife.

"And that's midnight," Strife said with satisfaction.

The air around the owl shimmered, and then suddenly, it was a great bear standing atop the hill. It roared at the Qunari and swatted one with a great claw that ripped through armor and flesh, sending the Qunari flying from the hilltop down into the clearing below.

The other Qunari swung his ax, but the bear caught the haft of the weapon in its mouth and shattered it in its jaws. A moment later, another clawed swipe sent the warrior tumbling down into the clearing as well, and the bear roared with all the fury of the forest behind it.

"Huntmaster!" Bas-taar shouted, his legs still kicking as he grasped at the chain around his throat. "Do your duty! Destroy those who threaten the Qun!"

"Yes," called the Huntmaster, "that's the idea . . . *Bas-taard*."

A sudden shocked silence washed across the clearing as the Huntmaster tossed his bow aside.

"Antaam, to me!" Bas-taar choked out.

“I am not Antaam.” The Huntmaster smiled as the Qunari beside him looked at him in confusion.

In one fluid motion, he swung the spear down from his back and hurled it across the clearing. Bas-taar shuddered as the spear struck, then went silent and still.

Now weaponless, the Huntmaster raised his hands, and then, as though they stood at a fancy ball, he placed a hand across his waist and bowed politely, his stoic expression melting into a polite smile beneath the face paint.

“I am Saarbrak, of the Ben-Hassrath,” he said, and the other Qunari scrambled away, turning their backs on Myrion and Strife and the bear as though *he* were suddenly the greatest threat.

“I heard *rumors*,” he said, walking forward and looking to the Qunari in the clearing, “that the Antaam who took Ventus did not act in accordance with the Qun.” He sounded disappointed. “Some of the *bas* now call us monsters.” He gestured up at Myrion and the others on the hilltop. “And they are not wrong. *This* is what threatens the Qun.”

“Hass ebala-varaad nehraa,” he said as he pulled his spear from Bas-taar’s body. *“For those I watch, of which I am one.”* He held his spear loosely, not raised but ready if needed.

The bear shimmered in the air and became Irelin, her furs and leather sparkling in the moonlight as she looked down at the Qunari. “Go and live, Saarbrak of the Ben-Hassrath,” she said. “This is not your place.”

Saarbrak nodded. He picked up his bow and raised it in a brief salute. “I was better with the spear than I was with this.”

“Seemed like a good shot to me,” Strife called back, holding his injured stomach.

“I was aiming for your arm.” Saarbrak grinned and placed the great bow carefully back on the ground. “Good luck.”

He stepped back into the forest with a stern look at the other Qunari, and they followed him, heads down and shoulders bowed. In moments, the clearing held only Myrion, Strife, Irelin, and Bas-taar’s corpse.

Strife shuffled forward and lifted his leg, and with a groaning clank of metal, Bas-taar’s body slid free and tumbled down the steep slope to crash at the bottom. “Cut it a little close, lass.”

She gave him a look. “It is at least two hours before midnight. You’re lucky I came at all.”

Strife laughed. “Fair enough. I don’t suppose you remembered to bring the lockpick.”

“I was in a hurry.” She shrugged. “We can still cut the human’s foot off.”

Myrion blanched, but Strife just laughed again. “Maybe I can shoot it off with the bow he left me.”

“As though you could even draw that thing,” Irelin said, rolling her eyes. “It’s as tall as you are.”

“It may require a bit of practice,” Strife said, and limped over to Bastaar’s massive ax. He lifted it in both hands. “This will do for now, then. Myrion, you’re going to want to stay very, very still.”

Myrion lay back, trying to ignore the throbbing of his injured arm. “Not a problem.”

It took three great blows, each of which sent painful reverberations up Myrion’s leg, but finally the bolt on his shackle snapped. Strife staggered back, the shackle trailing behind him and rattling in the grass. He dropped the ax and stretched out his back. “Ah, finally.”

Myrion stretched his leg, shaking the broken shackle free. “Try not to miss me too much.”

Strife laughed. “I think I’ve gotten my exercise for the day. Irelin, if you wouldn’t mind making camp, we can rest up, then head back to the clan in the morning.”

“What about him?” Irelin asked, pointing at Myrion.

“I know, I know. This isn’t my place, either.” Myrion waved it away. “Let me get my arm bandaged and a night’s rest, and I’ll be on my way.”

Strife clapped him on the shoulder—the one without the injured arm. “You’re right, *shem*. This isn’t your place. But then, once upon a time, it wasn’t mine, either.”

Myrion smiled up at the older elf hesitantly. He wasn’t sure exactly what morning would hold.

But at least he’d be there to see it.

DOWN AMONG THE DEAD MEN

SYLVIA FEKETEKUTY

He'd done everything he could to avoid being drafted into the funeral guard: swapping duties, extra shifts, tasteful bribes. Nothing had worked. Audric's friends in the city watch had assumed it was the tedium he hated, and Audric, embarrassed, let them. Now, spear straight, he listened to the old priest's surprisingly hale voice boom off the stonework with prayers for a dead man.

"And the Maker, clad in the majesty of the sky, set foot to earth, and at His touch all warring ceased."

Audric hadn't known the dead nobleman, but Penrick Karn's funeral was well-attended. A few mourners appeared genuinely heartbroken. Audric kept his gaze away from their red eyes and grief-twisted faces, maintaining a respectfully bland stare into the middle distance.

"From every corner of the earth the Chant of Light echoed, and the Maker walked the land."

Audric's eyes wandered to the majesty of the copper-tiled vaults. This temple complex had been built to celebrate the retaking of Nevarran lands (3:65 Towers helmed by King Caspar II, long may he rest). That it was a marvel among a city of marvels didn't diminish the glittering craftsmanship. What did sour it was the dead man on the bier behind

him. Audric squirmed at the thought of the hollow pits that were his eyes . . .

Curiosity, his father had said in their clay-walled home on the outskirts of the city. That was Audric's trouble. *Curiosity and too much schooling for a boy that wakes up crying from nightmares, my lad.*

"By the Maker's will I decree harmony in all things."

Audric had grown out of those nightscapes as he entered the tedium of a guardsman. He missed them in an odd way, their crooked sceneries, their strange terrors that felt tailored only to him. The vaults here had faint echoes of that majesty, blurred greatly by memory and time.

Lost in a gloomy churn of thoughts, Audric didn't hear the whisper of silk on the bier as the priest thundered the end of the chant. He missed the crowd's faces turning quizzical, then horrified.

"Let Balance be restored and the world given eternal life!"

But Audric would always remember the moment a withered hand grasped him by the shoulder, and a corpse in jangling gold crunched its teeth into his neck.

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"What happened then?" the older mage tilted a pot of tea encouragingly toward Audric. The younger mage, a woman with pulled-back hair and a severe gaze, sipped her own tea and regarded the guardsman silently.

Audric shook his head—he didn't feel like tea, particularly—while his eyes soaked in the room. He'd never been in a necromancer's study before. Ornately decorated skulls hung from hooks in the high, dark ceiling. One wall was made up of shelves with books and tiny labeled drawers. The other was fronted by tables full of bubbling flasks, scales, alembics, and tortured-looking glass. A smartly attired servant ground away with a pestle and mortar. Despite himself, Audric's eye kept settling there.

"Please, don't mind Manfred." The older mage refilled his own cup. "He'll finish mixing that tincture before you know it."

Manfred, a clean-boned skeleton, held up a bowl. Audric read something helpful in the cant of its skull. The younger mage looked critical. "It needs half a cup more elfroot."

The corpse pulled out one of the drawers on the far side of the room, took out a withered root, and shook it inquiringly.

"The *royal* elfroot, please."

Manfred moaned and fumbled at more drawers.

Every mage in the kingdom of Nevarra was part of the Mortalitasi, a group that trained the gifted in the mysteries of magic. They served as Nevarra's arcane protectors and priests. *Within* the Mortalitasi was a group of select mages invited into an old fraternity called the Mourn Watch. The Watchers served as elite guardians, keepers of the Grand Necropolis and its sacred repository of the dead.

"Yes! That's the one." The older mage beamed. "Very good indeed, Manfred!"

This was the first time Audric had met a Watcher. They had been the picture of courtesy, but Audric thought it would be futile to explain to them what the sight of a skeleton ambling under its own power did to a simple guardsman.

"Now, where were we?"

Audric dragged his gaze back to the older Watcher across from him, with his silvered hair, tidy mustache, and long face full of concern. His expression reminded Audric of the Chantry scholars when they'd caught him reading by candlelight in the library. The good brothers and sisters had kindly tried to dissuade Audric from living in pages for so long he couldn't think straight come morning. It never worked.

"Is there anything else you can recall about Lord Karn's funeral?" the mage asked gently.

"No? I think . . . not much, sir. Another guard, she, well . . . Dellah even had to peel him off me, sir."

The necromancer waved a hand. "Emmrich will do, please."

Audric nodded absently, touching the bandage on his neck. "It's . . . sorry, it's a blur of screams, sir."

"Some of it your own, I'd bet," the necromancer joked, but looked so sympathetic Audric relaxed by a degree.

"Yes, sir." He *had* screamed, falling to the floor as the snapping, well-dressed corpse dug into his shoulders. He'd screamed as Dellah tried to pry it off and was smacked into the altar for her trouble. He'd screamed as he braced a boot against the corpse's rib cage and kicked over and over.

"The Mourn Watch can see to this, guardsman Audric," the younger mage commented. "This is our bailiwick. You are fully committed to this venture?"

Audric tried to recall how she'd been introduced. He'd been trying to stay as far as possible from Manfred at the time.

"The captain, well, they want the city guard to be involved, madam," Audric said.

What the captain had actually said was *That bloody ceremonial duty is supposed to be* ceremonial! and *Make sure those musty corpse-botherers bury Karn's body before his family blame us somehow for this*. And then she had, rather unexpectedly, patted him sympathetically and gingerly on the shoulder.

"If I can ask, if it's all right—" Audric fumbled. He'd never dealt with necromancers face-to-face, outside seeing them at funerals. "Do you know what's been going on?"

"Premature possession," the younger Watcher said crisply. The older one, Emmrich, nodded. "It must be, but that should be nigh impossible this close to the Grand Necropolis."

"How come?" Audric asked.

"Excellent question!" Emmrich swirled the tea in his mug, looking too cheerful, Audric thought, for a man framed by so many racks of skulls. "The simple explanation is the wards inside the crypts deter most minor, errant spirits. Penrick Karn is either a man of great and unfulfilled passions, or very unlucky." The necromancer took a swallow. "After the funeral, Karn's corpse was spotted heading toward the necropolis. It would be easier to locate him if we had any remains, but there was very little spare material left after his body was displayed."

Audric reached into a pocket and brought out a handkerchief. He unrolled its contents onto the polished desk. "Will, um . . . will this do?"

The younger Watcher raised one thin eyebrow. *Myrna*. That was it. Her name was Myrna.

"I found it . . . got it in the fight, madam. With Lord Karn. Woke up with it scraping my palm."

Myra picked up the curved rib bone. One end was jagged from where Audric's boot had connected with Karn's rib cage. She handed it to Emmrich. "Excellent. Emmrich? This is your remit."

"I'll have it ready before sunset." He sighed. "It would be faster if we'd managed to replace the librarian by now. The students have naturally left the books a mess."

Myrna nodded and swept to the door, robes flaring. "Guardsman? Come along."

"What for?"

"A gentle inquiry into the manner of Penrick Karn's death."

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"My brother was stabbed to death by Duke Janus Van Markham in an alley."

Audric was already wilting under Ivona Karn's hawkish gaze. "Are you . . . are you *sure*, Lady Karn?"

"Utterly."

"It's only, the guard was never told . . . I don't think the captain knows how he—"

"What of it?" The deceased Lord Karn's older sister sniffed, her handsome face wrinkling in disdain. "Why should I let the details of my brother's death become the barracks' gossip? Janus was a bitter rival of Penrick's. They bumped into each other at a drinking establishment, overindulged, and bickered about who'd slain more dragons on the field. Then they fought, and disgraced both our houses by killing each other on a common, public street."

"We, um—but the bodies—"

"I arranged for the footmen to deliver my brother's body to the priests. The Van Markhams did the same for Janus." Lady Karn scowled. "The involvement of the city guard in a matter of private grief seemed most unnecessary."

Audric rallied. "Were there any witnesses to Lord Karn's death?"

"The staff of the tavern, my brother's attendants, Janus's attendants, and several passersby who stopped to watch the sport."

Myrna's presence had meant Lady Karn couldn't turn them away—the Mourn Watchers had absolute authority over funerary dead—but the noblewoman had practically ground her teeth when inviting them into her parlor. Frilly and gilded, Audric couldn't help note, in that Orlesian style that was all the rage in the Free Marches forty years ago.

Lady Karn rose. "If this has wound to its end, my household is still in mourning."

"One last inquiry, Lady Karn," Myrna said. "Was there a similar disturbance at Duke Janus's funeral? Was it as *restless* as Lord Karn's?"

Lady Karn glared. "Duke Janus was interred in the Winged Halls of the Great Necropolis, a day before my brother's funeral. Without

incident or delay."

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"I promise, guardsman: You will be perfectly safe by my side."

Audric hung back from a set of massive stone gates. They were lit by braziers and flanked by statues of robed and skull-faced men. *Carved in a style favored in the Exalted Age*, Audric's memory inanely reminded him. *Basalt from northern Ferelden, onyx inlays from Cumberland. Note how precisely the light falls on the skulls.*

"Why, well . . . why would Lord Karn go *into* the Necropolis?" Audric crossed his arms, hoping they didn't start to shake. "I don't understand. Why not let himself be buried if he wanted inside?"

"The Mortalitasi believe that when someone dies, an inhuman spirit is pushed out from the Fade into our world." Myrna waved a gloved hand at the panorama of the Grand Necropolis, whose upper levels could be seen past the gates, quarried into the stone. "In exchange, we invite those inhuman spirits to house themselves in the empty bodies left behind. Correct?"

Audric shrugged. It was such common knowledge he didn't see her point. Of course outside Nevarra, most nations burned their dead instead of entombing them. Even Audric, with no love of corpses, found the thought disturbing.

"Less well known is that if a more vigorous spirit claims a corpse, it may become emmeshed in that man or woman's unfinished business. Whatever Lord Karn's goal, it must be something that would disturb the Necropolis. Or it could lie within a part forbidden even to the dead."

Audric shuddered. Something on a causeway past the gates was coming toward them.

"And the spirit driving him is a strong one indeed," Myrna added.

"I'll be no good down there, madam!" Audric blurted.

"Why?"

"I'm sorry, I don't do well. With the dead. Madam."

"Why not?"

Audric shrugged helplessly. "They make me uncomfortable. Since . . . ever since I was young. I get nervous round corpses, madam."

"Fascinating." Myrna looked oddly intrigued. "Then I must apologize for my choice of transportation."

A carriage rattled up. Audric gripped his spear. The horses were bare skeletons with coronas of sickly, surging green fire. The pair stamped as they drew up. Audric stepped back as a horse swung its bony head around, as if mimicking a living curiosity.

"Madam?" Audric's voice was strangled.

Myrna's face was half shadowed by the bulk of the carriage, rimmed by that spectral light. The appraising look on her face threw Audric back to being called to the Chantry mother's office in trouble, the squirming sensation of being measured in a way all his reading hadn't prepared him for.

"This must be your choice." Myrna lit into the carriage, skirts brushing the lacquer-black frame. "Only answer one question." The inside of the carriage was dark and curtained. Myrna's voice issued from plush shadows. "Would not a guardsman who's recited the history of every stone in *every* promenade we've passed regret passing up the chance to see the architecture of the Grand Necropolis?"

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"I didn't know I was talking out loud," Audric muttered, clinging to a handhold as the carriage pelted down a track circling the Necropolis's open-air mausoleums.

"You mumble." Myrna seemed more relaxed, now that they were on their way. "I am impressed by the specificity of your knowledge."

"Er . . . the Chantry taught me letters." Ivy-smothered archways whipped by, then the horses plunged down a thoroughfare lined with human-size urns. "I kept some books."

"Architectural art seems to be your passion."

"Yes, madam."

"And you have excellent recall. Given your apparent zeal, I'm surprised you didn't join the Chantry's scholars."

Audric thought of those old rooms of books with a pang, followed by a darker current: coughing in poorly lit rooms by the river. A yearlong fever, haunting his parents and cousins. "A guard makes enough to feed their family, madam."

Myrna seemed content to leave things there, and took something out of a velvet purse. A rib bone. "Emmrich's prepared your trophy for us. His cathexis is very reliable."

Audric felt the ground tilt downslope. “Madam?”

“His magic.” She tapped the rib bone. “This will now guide us to where Lord Karn’s fled. Emmrich would join us, but he’s been called to other matters.”

The carriage swung down a tunnel. Audric felt his ears pop, a sensation he recognized from swimming in lakes as a child. *That can’t be right. We’ve only started traveling down.*

“What, pardon me, madam . . . what’s more urgent than a body loose in the Grand Necropolis?”

Her cheek quirked. “Our chief issue will be sorting him out from the others.”

They finally careened to a halt. Somehow, in that sunless tunnel, was a row of pale willows. Their drooping branches formed a silent bower leading to a cage over a square, dark pit.

“Have you ever been to the Necropolis?” Myrna asked as she stepped out, unlatching the cage’s gate.

Audric thought about his parents. “Twice.”

“We will be going deeper than the public gardens.” The necromancer snapped a finger. The cage clattered as if were being shaken by something deep below. “Touch nothing, make little sound, and do not wander.”

“Yes, madam.” Audric touched the bandage on his neck again, and tried very hard not to look at the stamping skeletal horses. “Madam. When you . . . when we see Lord Karn . . .”

“Yes?”

Audric rubbed his neck, feeling more than a little resentment at the thought of the man. It was as if all the terror from the funeral was slowly transmuting into outrage. “He’s, um, he’s a mean biter in death, madam. How do we rope his sorry lordship back with us?”

A platform rose up, slamming into place inside the cage with what sounded to Audric like a very final thud.

“We will ask him, guardsman. Politely.”

* * *

The cage had been descending for a minute, its chains shuddering and groaning. Audric strained to see the levels they passed through the gloom. Here was the lower parts of the open-air gardens, but they’d gone down below them already. Surely.

"The Necropolis's geography is a tangle."

Audric startled. Myrna was beside him, closer than he'd realized. She put a steadying hand on his shoulder. Audric was further surprised to feel the warmth of it through Myrna's glove, even a heartbeat after she removed the hand. "It subtends in unexpected ways."

"I don't, er . . . I can't take your meaning, madam."

"The lower halls and chambers of the Great Necropolis are not always in the same place at the same time."

The lift went past another level. Audric stepped back as he saw skeletons in armor trudging sightlessly between rows of crypts. Their rotting clothing had the Watchers' stamp on it. Some sort of undead guard?

"Powerful magic, madam."

"Oh, yes." Myrna took out the rib bone, turning it over and over in her hands. Audric was fairly certain she was looking at something he couldn't see. "The deeper we travel, the more pronounced the effect becomes." Myrna snorted, a sound Audric hadn't expected from her. "There's a reason even the canniest of thieves have never pilfered past the —"

The lift jolted, stopped. A voice screeched up the shaft.

"Interlopers! Moldering busybodies! Wretched, gall-filled vermin!"

Myrna sighed. "Lord Karn, I presume."

"You'd chain me back up in that box before my honor is restored!"

"Your body and spirit are at odds," Myrna said pleasantly, as if they were speaking in a market. "I've come to correct this."

"Bah!"

Audric looked around, attempting to pinpoint where Karn's voice was coming from. He was perturbed to realize it was echoing from inside his own head.

"Lord Karn seems more, um . . . how's he talking, madam?" Audric whispered.

"He's had time to reconstitute himself," Myrna replied. "I suspect a spirit of Pride moves his lips."

"No!" The force of it rocked the lift. *"I am myself! I am Penrick Karn, death of dragons, favored of the kings of Nevarra!"* The spirit's voice reached a fever peak. *"Join the dead you hold so dear, and leave me to my work!"*

Something rattled the top of the cage, and made a sharp, chiming *snap*. Then the lift fell.

"Guardsman!" Myrna grabbed Audric again. There was a sickening *whip-whip-whip* as entrances flashed past the lift's doors too fast to see. Audric looked at her in terror, but through the screaming plummet Myrna's eyes were fastened on those squares of light. Corpse-glow flickered.

"Hold fast!"

Audric's neck prickled, *and there was a wrench—*

Audric hit stone. The Mourn Watcher slid to a stop beside him. This was a vaulted corridor. *Fine marble finished by sand-polish*, his mind chattered, *and there's a bronze trim on those sconces of green fire*. A few lengths away was the lift shaft. Broken chains whipped past, followed by nothing, then a distant crashing *boom*. Dust billowed out, coating them both.

Myrna coughed into a handkerchief. Audric pulled himself up, saw he was braced on a tomb, and almost fell again letting go. As the dust settled Myrna wiped her face, tucked away the handkerchief, and turned to face Audric.

"Guardsman? I fear we face a slight delay."

* * *

That sleight of hand she'd used in the lift, Myrna explained, could only whisk people about a step or two. She had no spell that would magic them aboveground. They would have to return the long way. After, and she emphasized this, they dealt with Lord Karn.

"Where is he now?" Audric asked. "Was he . . . was that him *inside* the lift?"

"Karn cast forth a shadow. Pride has the power to make itself known where it is unwanted, and I am sure it is a spirit of Pride that has possession of Lord Karn's remains."

"Seems so, madam."

Audric looked around, still dazed. The delayed fright warred with a fascination with the stateliness of his surroundings. The place was beyond antique. He peered up at a cornice carved with skulls merrily staring back down. The grainy stone looked as if it was at least from the Tower Age. Did the Grand Necropolis go back that far?

Audric considered it, then another thought intruded. "Lord Karn, madam. He's tried to kill me twice!"

"Unfortunate," Myrna agreed.

"Do you know where we are?"

"Yes," she replied, then added, "Approximately."

A wind suddenly whipped through the corridor, rattling dried flowers tied in sheaths to the crypts.

"Madam?"

"I hear it. Stay by me. Be still."

The sconces' fires dimmed. Audric backed into Myrna, who'd gone still herself. Voices leaked through the air, which seemed to darken in a fashion unrelated to the light. The sounds grew louder, witless gibbering that sounded like words but slipped away just before being understood. It came from all around, as if they were in a crowd, and underneath the mutters Audric heard something more, a predatory droning crawling nearer . . .

Eventually, it faded. A frown pinched Myrna's face, and her voice was soft. "We are lower in the Necropolis than is wise. Cleave to me, for both our sakes." Then she held out her hand.

"I can't, I wouldn't presume . . ." Audric babbled, horribly ashamed for some reason.

"The presumption is mine." Myrna looked down the passage. "If you're in contact with me, you may see things . . . more clearly. Until we reach the upper levels."

Audric took her hand. He was wearing his gauntlets, but warmth spread up his arm. What sorts of magics the Mourn Watchers had at their disposal he didn't know, but the air seemed to steady. The corridor lead into a tall room with pillars repeating in long lines like an arcade. To Audric's astonishment, streams of black water gurgled through the chamber, via channels cut into the rock.

"It's like the Gardens of Yith in Starkhaven!" he blurted.

Myrna stepped over a stream. "A visiting architect must have been inspired."

Audric watched the streams ripple. They braided together at the end of the room, feeding into a carved gap in the wall, then sounded as if they'd turned into a waterfall. "A duke had the gardens built over the resting place of his lover's ashes three hundred years ago."

"You are one for trivia. Emmrich would be delighted."

"Madam?" Audric ventured. "What's Lord Karn's 'mission'? What . . . well . . . what does he want?"

"Karn's temerarious flight has something to do with 'honor,' supposedly," Myrna said as they picked their way across the narrow channels. "Nobility's intrigues never held any interest for me."

Something itched at the back of Audric's mind at that, but the thought was shattered by a loud splash behind them.

"Madam—"

"Hold."

Something flopped out of one of the streams, inching forward. Pale blooms stretched and grasped the air. Fingers, Audric realized. Connected fans of scrabbling armbones. But the streams were too *shallow* to accommodate that bulk of arms and hooked fingers . . .

"Madam!"

"Behind me." Audric obeyed. Myrna added, "Do not drop my hand."

The thing kept oscillating out of the water, undulating up more and more fused bones, nightmare fronds of something that was never alive. Water poured off a tangle of ribs that crested up before them like a cobra's hood, crowned by a misshapen thing vaguely resembling a skull. It split open sideways, its gullet spiked all the way down its neck—

Myrna slapped it, whip-fast, with an echoing *crack*. Her hand coruscated with emerald fire.

"We are permitted passage," she enunciated clearly. "Leave." The thing's neck curled in confused anger, away from the Mourn Watcher's flames. It hissed like shifting sand. The spell burning in Myrna's hand coiled into ropes. A lash or a whip. Strangling cords.

"I will not ask again."

The thing fluked back down into the murky waters. Audric realized he had been squeezing the Watcher's other hand far too tight, and relaxed his grip.

"Thank you." Myrna turned, and only then did she shake her free hand with a wince. "What bones. Like *iron*."

"Madam?" Audric whispered. "What's . . . how did . . . *what was that thing?*"

"Uncataloged," Myrna said briskly. "Emmrich will be thrilled to hear of it. Let us depart, quickly."

***

Audric's next few hours were a series of wonders and horrors, a grand delirium like those nightmares of his childhood. He stood with awe in the arena-size tomb of a warrior-queen, carved with a riot of battles and feasts that cavorted on the stone. He shivered at the majesty of the Flowering Gates closing off a silent, enormous silver grave. He crossed a bridge made of giants' bones, over a pit of skeletons of a sort he did not recognize. He hid from a wheezing thing that doused all the light around it, but left behind lingering gray shadows when it was gone.

Just once, Audric had let go of Myrna's hand, when a specter rushed him. Everything had suddenly been much darker and disorienting. The Mourn Watcher had dispelled the spirit while Audric clung to the sides of a grave. He'd felt as if the room were heaving. When she'd grabbed his elbow again, things snapped into focus.

Not that Myrna's presence made the architecture less baffling. Corridors sprouted where there should have been no room between the walls. Stairs brought them to a higher landing than the ones they'd started on. At one point, they'd make their way through a maze of mirrors with sliding panels that led to smaller and smaller boxlike rooms until they had to crawl. All the time, he'd gripped the Watcher's glove, and all the time, his mind worried about Lord Karn.

"Has he . . . has Karn found what he wanted yet, madam?"

"He may be occupied," Myrna said, as they traveled a gently sloping path past tableaux of the dead. The carefully preserved corpses had been posed as they'd been in life, reenacting their daily rituals. Some even moved, albeit slowly. "It's no easier for the dead to pass through some of these places than the living."

"Lord Karn must want this manner of honor settled pretty . . . very badly."

"Undoubtedly," Myrna replied. "Have no fear. We draw closer to the upper levels."

Audric felt it. A lightening in the air. The twists and turns of the passages were just as numerous, but the chambers were quieter. They even passed a few docile undead shuffling past harmlessly. After the exotic terrors below, Audric only felt mild aversion instead of his previous squirming fear.

Myrna stopped abruptly.

"That statue," she said. "How would you describe it?"

"Lapis lazuli carved in the *amour-tourmente* Orlesian style, holding a scepter."

"Does it seem familiar?"

"Um, I've seen woodcuts of the style. In books."

"Does it seem as if we've passed it before?"

"Oh."

"Four times now." Myrna looked about as if the room would spit up answers. "Something has foiled our direction."

A voice spoke. Audric had last heard it in the cage of the lift. *"Vanity, Watcher, to think you could stop the pride of his house!"*

The Watcher sniffed. Her hand went to the velvet purse and the rib bone. "These games diminish us all, your lordship."

"You will have nothing of me!" Karn's voice seemed deeper, more resonant, Audric noticed. Was that how demonic spirits sounded, once they settled into a body? *"I can feel you tugging with that little piece of rib, and dragging that wretched* thing *behind you!"*

Audric cleared his throat. "I don't . . . we wish you no ill, Lord Karn." He was, in fact, imagining throttling what was left of the man's throat. Audric felt a sympathetic pain from the wound on his neck.

"The Mourn Watch would cage me, let me molder on a shelf!"

Myrna's lips became a thin frown as she looked around, as if searching for the disembodied voice beyond the walls. "Lord Karn—"

Something smashed through the ceiling. Audric was nearly crushed as a golem of lashed-together bones hit the floor with a *crack*. It thudded toward them, effortlessly shoving aside the broken stone.

Audric heard Lord Karn's voice sneer, *"I go to make my challenge, Watcher."* Just before the golem's long bone-glaive whistled down.

Audric and Myrna dived in different directions. The golem swept the glaive back at head height. Audric was saved by ducking behind a fallen chunk of stone. He scrambled farther as the golem advanced. Myrna started to dash to where he was. "Guardsman! As in the lift! Come to—"

The golem slammed the glaive into the ceiling. Myrna barely tumbled clear of a slab of stone the size of a horse. The pouch containing the rib bone slipped from her hand, and the golem's blade scythed down. There was a *crunch*. Myrna winced but kept moving even as the glaive spun.

There was a ring of metal on metal as it hit Audric's spear.

"Guardsman!"

Audric barely deflected the golem's next sweep. The creaking monster had the strength of a rockslide. He feinted to the side. A second set of arms unfolded from the golem's chest, clutching knives. Audric parried the first, dodged the second. The main glaive swung back like a pendulum—

Warm dizziness, a rush of cool stone.

Audric gasped. They were in a room of smooth, dark green walls and tiny candles cupped in yellow glass. He could hear the golem stomping somewhere above them, glaive scraping the floor. A bony form in a deep shelf of the room stirred at the sound. It looked at them reproachfully, then rolled back to its rest.

The guardsman pushed himself up with a scrape. "Thank you, madam," he said. There was something subtly wrong about the depth of the place. *Floor-length Serault-glass mirrors, fixed in the green. See how the candles look like hovering stars . . .*

Myrna shook her head, brushing off her dress. "Your endangerment is directly related to my folly."

"No! You, um . . . you came for me, madam."

"As I should."

The sound of the golem faded. Either it had stopped, or wandered away. Audric patted himself down. "Would've been easy to leave me. Um. So thank you, again."

His hand jutted against something cold.

"Guardsman?"

"Sorry. Something's, I don't know what—"

"Guardsman." Myrna sounded regretful. Audric felt a sudden, inexplicable pang. "I'm afraid this must be now."

"What must?" Audric heard a strain in his voice. "What's now?"

"Look down."

"I don't know what you—"

"Look down."

Audric looked. The broken blade of the glaive was lodged straight through his dry, unbloodied, unbreathing chest.

"Oh."

***

The Chantry sisters that had schooled Audric were also Nevarran. The nation's orthodoxy accepted that the Grand Necropolis was a fitting resting place for the bodies of all good souls destined to sit by the side of the Maker. The metaphysics of what would happen to his flesh, however, had been handwaved. The spirit that would be placed there was not their providence, the sisters said. The city's necromancers would tend to that after his final hour came.

Audric felt somehow cheated he was still conscious after it had happened.

***

"When?" he demanded. "How . . . how long have I been . . . has this . . ."

"Guardsman Audric Felhausen died of his wounds after Lord Karn's funeral." Myrna sounded apologetic. "His body arose the next morning, and went to his old post. Your captain was at a loss. As you were intestate, she sent you to us to ease your passage."

"I'm not dead," Audric said as he grabbed at the blade in his chest. "I'm myself. I'm not a spirit, I'm . . . I'm *me!*" Audric staggered as the blade came out with a sickening *crunch*. Flakes of—*oh Maker*— dried blood came out with it.

"You are not quite what you were, if that's who you still aim to be."

"Please! Stop . . . stop talking like that." Audric trembled. How could the dead—*no, not yet*—tremble?

"Have you noticed your thoughts growing circular? Tell me about your life outside your love of art, Audric. Expound on any other topic."

"I'm . . . I can think just fine." His own hands. If he took off a gauntlet, what would he see? "*I'm* Audric Felhausen, not some spirit going . . . using his body for a stroll!"

"What have you thought since we embarked?" Myrna asked patiently. "What's impressed itself?"

The style of the place. The buildings, the frescoes, the statues! And Karn, always back to Karn.

"Many things," he said weakly. Myrna's look sliced clean through him.

"The truth, Guardsman Audric."

He'd loved his books. He'd never had any pretentions to being a scholar; he'd simply wanted to collect and read for its own sake. After work, after a few

drinks with the other guards he'd slip away shyly to his apartment and read by lamplight and fire. He'd loved the comfortable silence of those nights, loved them more than anything else . . .

Audric lurched over to a mirror. A hollow face sagged back at him.

He groaned, and the sound, he now realized, was of a piece with the dead around him. His vision grew dim with a dry, throat-closing anger. This had been *his* life! And there'd been so *little* of it! Karn, that demon, whatever that thing was, had ended it without a thought. Audric wanted to rend the man limb from crackling limb, imagined raking his hands across that face, tearing everything and *anything at all*—

A glove clamped his shoulder. He felt the warmth of a living hand.

"You will not lose yourself." The voice was stern, a warning shackle. "I forbid it. You are suited for better things than rage."

For a moment Audric saw his body, Myrna, and the green stonework from above, as if he hovered a length outside them all. Then more of *himself* slid back into place. His sight grew clearer.

"You brought me here to watch me," he said, quietly bitter.

"The Mourn Watch assists both the dead and the living. We wish to help you resolve what you are."

"What's that?"

"Driven." Myrna squeezed his shoulder more consolingly, then stepped away. "An entity as complete as you are is rare. Some of my colleagues argue the 'higher dead' such as yourself do, in fact, hold fast to their mortal souls. Others attest that this is impossible. They would say you are caught between *two* spirits: anger and curiosity. Whatever the case, you are unbalanced. Confronting Karn with you was my remedy."

Audric let the glaive fall with a clatter. There was another groan from the nook in the wall.

"But Karn's golem crushed the talisman." Myrna looked up, as if replaying the scene. "I cannot find him easily now."

"He mentioned honor," Audric said. It felt easier to think, strangely, now that he realized the body—*my body*—wasn't receiving leftover ideas about needing to breathe. The dizziness that had come on him was gone. "Er . . . He also said something about a challenge."

"It could be anything. A spirit of Pride would fasten onto something crucial to Lord Karn's dignity."

"So, you don't think he's gone to the Winged Halls? To finish his duel with the man who killed him? Duke Janus?" Audric asked.

Myrna slowly closed her eyes.

"It just . . . it seems likely to me, madam."

It was a moment before she spoke. "You will excuse me. I am cataloging all the ways I've been a fool."

Audric considered that. "I don't think so, madam. I mean, I'd still like to find Lord Karn." He picked up his spear, dented but miraculously unbroken. "I won't . . . don't know if I I can stop myself from trying to fight him. I'll try."

"Good." Myrna sent a mote of light into the nook in the wall. A moment later, a skeleton fell out, hissing and snapping. Myrna snagged it with a collar of green fire, tugged it like a leash.

"Does that . . . hurt it?" Audric asked, more sympathetic to the shambling thing than he'd been a minute ago.

"The sensations differ. With some of the dead, one must exert direct control."

The skeleton subsided, making a strange whine. "A message," the Mourn Watcher told it. "Find Professor Emmrich Volkahrin. Tell him after some last business in the Winged Halls, we'll be joining him above without delay."

***

A large figure in golden armor hacked the last lock off an enormous mausoleum gate. It held out a hand, and the doors burst inward. The Van Markham tombs were spacious as mansions, ceilings carved with knights fighting dragons, rivers of wine pouring from goblets, all circling a skull over a throne.

The horror shuffled to the first tomb, the most recently deceased of the line. It placed a proprietary hand upon the lid.

"The Triumphs of the Flower of Nevarran Chivalry in Stone!"

Karn whirled, eyes bleeding a purple light so deep it almost pulsed black. Audric gaped at the ceiling, and rasped: "Commissioned by King Caspar himself! I've only seen *plates!*"

"You preposterous nuisance!" Karn stormed out, and swayed when he saw the Mourn Watcher standing quietly beside the door.

"Desecrating one's own grave is one thing, Lord Karn. Defiling another's is vulgar."

"Janus Van Markham owes me a duel."

"A pantomime. You'll only wake more of the dead." Myrna looked at the hacked-off locks with distaste. "I cannot let you draw more spirits here."

"Let them witness." Karn's shadow began to expand, a hulking shape at odds with the human frame holding a sword. The mark of the Pride demon, Audric realized. Karn continued, "*The living that slighted me above are next, once Janus relearns his place."*

"He's dead!" Audric shouted, his words echoing around the chamber. "What do . . . why could you care? You already killed each other!"

Karn brought his gaze back to the guardsman. The imprint of a larger presence swirled around the undead lord like an invisible storm of ash. *"What would you know of the price of higher stations?"*

Audric felt his rage rush back at once. Whatever he was, dead man or imitation of a dead man, he knew what following it would mean. Survival, fury, perhaps oblivion when Myrna put him down. Internment in this city of the dead.

But see how the vines of that ceiling curve around to turn into flowers.

"You slew me at your funeral." Audric hefted his spear. "You owe *me* a duel first, Lord Karn."

"Only one of noble blood—"

"Has killed today," Myrna said, equidistant from both men. "But perhaps Lord Karn fears to fight."

Karn was quiet for a heartbeat, then brought up his shield. *"Never."*

Karn was suddenly on Audric, slashing. Audric got what he knew was a lucky jab with his spear. It scraped off Karn's breastplate. The revenant wasn't as strong as the golem, but Karn was quick, applying the blade with neat, efficient strokes.

"Guardsman!"

"Stay back, Watcher." Karn spat. *"We duel as gentlemen: alone, with the weapons at hand."*

"I'll . . . it'll be fine!" Audric gurgled. He was dimly aware his body wasn't tiring like a mortal man's, but it seemed absurdly unfair he could still feel so much fear.

Karn feinted a sweep into a strike, and his sword punctured Audric's lung; a fatal blow if he'd been breathing. Audric pushed back, slamming his cross guard into Karn's helmet. Parted, the nobleman circled him, idly spinning his sword into a new stance. The match was his with time.

"I heard your babbling whenever you and the Watcher used that bone to look for me," Karn spat. *"A sad, sad thing, a spirit clinging to the dying curiosity of a man with a mania for baubles. You will die and fade in the marble halls of your betters from every single age."*

"Chalcedony, not marble," Audric said automatically. "Used in funerary buildings since the reign of Queen Verland."

"Would you keep quiet *about that for one solitary"*

Audric's spear shot through Karn's throat, nearly beheading him. Karn shrieked and flung out a hand. An inferno of light blasted Audric across the room.

"You cur! You impudent worm!" Magic dripped from Karn's fingers. *"The Watchers will find nothing of you but ash!"*

A lasso of emerald fire whirled neatly around Karn's neck.

"Using magic breaks your own rules, Lord Karn." Myrna pulled with one arm. Karn fell back, clawing at his ruined throat. "Your duel is forfeit."

"You cannot!" Karn buckled and strained against the rope. Audric saw gargantuan shadows twist around Karn, casting the chamber in flickering, thrashing light. The nobleman raised a clawed hand and the rope started to fray, until Audric slashed the hand with his spear. Karn howled, and the rope re-formed, tightening further.

"I can," Myrna said, nodding at Audric.

Myrna drew Karn in, and Audric harried him, jabbing and slashing before the nobleman could break the rope of fire. A gale rose. The force of the demon inside Karn crackled and flexed against the stone. Myrna calmly continued to pull, looking as if she was exerting no more effort than dragging a small but willful dog.

Finally, she had Karn near enough to touch, his flesh smoldering around the rope. "I did not permit you to duel Audric for your own satisfaction, Lord Karn," the Mourn Watcher declared.

"What, then?"

"I allowed him," Myrna said sweetly, "to see that Pride is a cheat."

Myrna yanked, hard. Karn screamed, suddenly stopped. Audric staggered up to Myrna right as the gaping skull, helmet and all, rolled to his feet.

The jittering shadows settled. The invisible presence that had filled Karn seeped away. The guardsman picked up the silent skull.

What familiar teeth.

And Audric placed it on Karn's fallen body, feeling nothing but sad relief.

"Excellent." Myrna tucked a stray hair back into place. "The crypt's calm already."

"What now, madam? With, um . . ."

"You heard my message to Emmrich." She crooked a finger, gesturing to Audric. "We'll be expected. It won't be difficult to return from here."

Audric looked around. "I can . . . I'm allowed to come back with you?"

"Of course." Myrna lifted her skirts and stepped over a chunk of stone from the fight. "Emmrich will be put out if we don't both show up for tea."

***

They were back in Emmrich's den. Audric had been astonished to see familiar tomes in a neat stack on the necromancer's desk.

"Those . . . are those . . . ?"

"Yours, yes. From your home." Emmrich shook his head. "Forgive the liberty, guardsman. After you and Myrna left for the Necropolis, I had to search for a reason you might have returned so unexpectedly."

"I believe we found it," Myrna said, from where she was overseeing Emmrich's manservant transfer the contents of a bubbling beaker into a bowl.

Emmrich handed the top book to Audric. It was a gazetteer of Nevarra City, stamped with a crowned skull surrounded by flowers. Audric flipped it open and read the blocky inscription.

To our Son with Love. May you be Blessed in your Studies with the Chantry.

"All this effort . . . for me? I'm just a guardsman, sir." *Am? Was?* Audric pushed doubt aside and held the gazetteer to his chest. He existed, knew what he loved, and that he had *been* loved, and that somehow seemed enough in the moment.

"The great leveler has no favorites." Emmrich smiled. "Neither does the Mourn Watch."

"You are faced with a choice," Myrna said, coming over. "You have confronted your killer, and recognized your driving passion. You may rest now, guardsman."

"Or?"

"Or you may work under the auspices of a Watcher," Myrna said. "Under a modicum of magical control. To avoid anomie, the bond must be given freely."

"To you, madam?"

"If it's satisfactory."

The guardsman ducked his head, and because that felt inadequate, knelt on a knee and held out a hand. Myrna, smiling slightly, took it.

Emmrich coughed, looking away. "Please, let the poor fellow up. What position were you thinking?"

"I thought it was obvious." Audric felt a slow excitement as he heard Myrna say: "We have a great need for someone to take charge of the library."

THE HORROR OF HORMAK

JOHN EPLER

The horses smelled it first. They were Warden horses, raised around the fetid stench of darkspawn, trained from birth to tolerate their smell and to not spook as easily as most animals. They had stood strong in the face of charging Ogres on more than one occasion.

But mere hours after entering the Nevarran forest, the horses that Warden Ramesh's small party rode on began to stamp and whinny uneasily, clearly frightened.

"Something here they don't like." Lesha looked wary. She was a Tevinter mage—confident to the point of cockiness, and not generally prone to fear.

"Don't tell me you don't feel it. Something's wrong—the whole place feels . . . broken." She glanced at Ramesh and added, "Besides, there's only two of us. Not even a full expeditionary group—we should be waiting for reinforcements."

Ramesh sighed, and ran his hand through his hair. The hell of it was, he knew exactly what Lesha meant. The air was thick, almost suffocating. It pressed down on them, and there was an acrid quality to it that burned his lungs, though he could not identify exactly what it was.

And she was right about the rules, too. On a rescue mission, you always took more Wardens than you had lost. Ostensibly to carry out the

living, but more practically, so you could kill whatever the previous group had not managed to kill. Numbers helped on that front.

But those rules had been written before Adamant, before Ostagar—when they still had the numbers to keep patrols wherever they were needed.

Besides, Senior Warden Jovis's group was now eight days overdue. Unnecessary risks were not something Ramesh liked to take, but by the time reinforcements came, those eight days would become fifteen. Add another ten to make their way back out this far, and it'd be a month—at which point protocol was to treat them as dead. They could ill afford such losses.

And the other reason. Something unsaid, unfinished, between the two of them. Jovis had meant everything to Ramesh once, but he'd pulled away. Death walked with every Warden, and you learned to bury grief beneath duty. Easier to do that, it seemed, before grief's edge had been honed by love and friendship. But regret had a weight of its own, and he wished he'd seen that sooner. He shook his head.

"We press on. We're a half day's ride from where Jovis's mining expedition last reported from. Could be they're fine," Ramesh added, "but until we get there we won't know. And if they aren't fine, and we turn back now? That's that." Lesha inclined her head, accepting the gentle rebuke, but the expression of unease never left her face.

"Understood, sir. Just feels . . . something's wrong about these woods. Feels like . . . like the air hates me. Wants me to die." She shook her head. "I know. It doesn't make sense, but that's how I feel. I just don't like this."

Ramesh laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Me neither. But we've got a job to do. Misgivings will keep." He hesitated, then added, "That said, one hand on your weapon. And an eye to the woods."

They rode on in silence, and Lesha's expression of unease deepened, became grim. The air grew heavier, the trees thicker, and even the sounds of the wind through the trees became muted, as if the outside world wanted no part of these woods.

Twenty-three years Ramesh had been a Warden. His Calling was nearly upon him—and if he'd been alone, if only he had felt the palpable sense of dread that filled the woods, he might have thought it was that. It reached every Warden differently. But Lesha had only been a Warden

for two. If she could feel it—if she sensed what Ramesh did—it was something real.

They'd gone another several miles down the muddy trail when, without warning, Lesha's horse reared violently, throwing her from her saddle and galloping madly back the direction they'd come from. Ramesh cursed and leapt from his horse. Lesha got to her feet shakily and met his inquisitive expression with a nod. She was fine, then. He leapt back to his own horse, and wheeled it around to chase after Lesha's.

Minutes passed. He rode hard, following the crushed underbrush that marked the horse's path, and from the crashing and snapping ahead of him, seemed to be gaining on it.

His own horse reared suddenly, danced backward a few steps, and Ramesh gripped the reins tightly, avoiding his own tumble into the underbrush through sheer bloody-mindedness. Patting the horse, he whispered to it, calming it, when he realized that the noise of movement ahead had completely stopped. Tugging gently on the reins, he turned his own animal back toward the path ahead and started forward.

The noise came suddenly and filled the forest. It was a tremendously large sound, and somehow palpably fleshy at the same time. There was a soft and liquid quality to the roar that sent gooseflesh crawling up Ramesh's entire body. It was a roar that marked cleanly the delineation between predator and prey—and it was accompanied by a terrified whinny that was cut off by a sickening crunch. There was another loud crash, a rustling noise, and then silence.

A full minute passed before Ramesh was able to get his breathing under control, and another minute before his horse would even move.

But slowly, inevitably, they pushed forward toward the source of whatever that horrendous exultation had been.

Trees had been snapped—not sideways across the trunk, as if by an ax, but vertically, struck from below by some tremendous force. In the middle of the clearing, a massive mound of dirt had been displaced. Recently, too, judging by the dampness of the soil, while smaller disturbances were visible around the edges of the clearing.

Of Lesha's horse, there was no sign—and no evidence that it had left the clearing at all. The pattern of destruction had a clear edge, and beyond that edge, the woods seemed undisturbed, the only evidence of any creature's passage being the trampled underbrush on the makeshift path that Ramesh and his own animal had followed into the clearing.

There was something else, too. The by now too familiar scent of decaying foliage, sickly sweet and pungent, certainly, but something else, too. Something sharper, saltier. It smelled like the sea on a stagnant day, the smell of brine and seaweed. Neither smell was unfamiliar to Ramesh, yet here, leagues away from the nearest ocean, there was a menace to it that troubled him.

And what exactly had happened to Lesha's animal? The tableau in front of Ramesh suggested it had been dragged underground. The Deep Roads were nearer to the surface here than they were in most parts of Thedas, but the speed with which the animal had been taken suggested something other than darkspawn.

Tapping his own horse's flank with his boot, he spurred it forward, through the gap in the clearing that he had entered, and back to where he'd left Lesha.

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He found her off the side of the trail in a small clearing—and she wasn't alone. A third figure lay in front of her, a crumpled form in the blue and silver. A Warden. One of Jovis's, more than likely. Dismounting his horse, he sprinted forward. Lesha half turned to speak.

"She came stumbling out of the woods. She's raving mad." She looked back at the wounded Warden. "I'm doing what I can, but I am not a healer. Something's wrong with her on the inside. More than just cuts or bleeding. Won't tell me what's wrong, though. Won't even look at me."

"What do you mean by raving? What exactly is she saying?" Ramesh asked.

"Nothing that makes even a bit of sense. Hear for yourself, though," Lesha said. Ramesh moved over to where the wounded Warden was lying, her head propped up by one of Lesha's saddlebags. Her skin was a ghostly white, and her breathing labored. A hole had been torn through her armor at the stomach, and a wound gaped.

"We didn't know. Didn't know . . . and now we do." She giggled, a high-pitched noise that sent a shiver down Ramesh's spine. "Got to know, though. Oh, yes—we know better. They taught us, gave us a lesson." A coughing fit interrupted her, and she spat several times as if to

clear a foul taste out of her mouth. Ramesh gave Lesha an inquisitive look, and she shook her head.

"Whatever toxin's in her system is one that must work its way out naturally. No response to my magic. I can make her comfortable. Nothing more," she said.

Ramesh crouched beside the injured Warden and leaned forward.

"Warden-Recruit Friedl, is it?" She nodded once, slowly, still refusing to meet his gaze. "Senior Warden Ramesh—my name, I mean. We're here looking for Jovis. You part of his group?" She nodded again, this time faster. "Good. Tell us what happened, then."

"We went too far. Too deep. Something's down there, something bad. We thought it was darkspawn but it's worse. Because it's different, you see? Not the same at all. Not twisted but made—created. Three died. They were lucky. I wasn't. Escaped. But not really." She met Ramesh's gaze then, and Ramesh recoiled in horror.

Her eyes were gone. Clawed out. Beside him, he was dimly aware of the sound of Lesha retching into the bushes. Friedl began to weep, tears streaming forth from the empty sockets.

"Don't make me go back. Not there, not where they are. I will not. I cannot. We must leave. This place to her, to them!" She began to hit the ground; sobs turned to screams that grew louder and louder. "They build it for her! They wait for her! I am free—I paid the price!" She started to scream once more, then came shrieks of pure terror intermixed with a laughter that contained not even a trace of humor. The screams grew until the volume was painful.

With a suddenness that caught Ramesh off guard, she leapt forward, knocking him to the ground and running past him into the woods. She'd nearly made it out of the clearing into the trees when blue light streamed from Lesha's hands, surrounding the Warden, enveloping her. She made it another dozen steps before staggering to her knees, and then collapsing to the ground, blessedly silent.

"Sleep magic. I should have done that sooner." Lesha paused, and then added quietly, "It is a small mercy, but the one that I can give."

"What do you think it is?" Ramesh asked, massaging his wrists. They were purpling and bruised. Tomorrow they would hurt more.

"Fear. Whatever she has seen, it has broken her. Poisoned her mind." Lesha looked at Ramesh. "We cannot take her with us. If we do, it will break her beyond all repair. Right now . . ." She gave a helpless shrug.

"She will live. And with time, her mind may heal. But if we take her back to where Jovis was—is," she corrected herself hastily, "we may as well strike her down ourselves."

"Leaving her is not an option. We must press forward—but if we leave her like this, food or no food, she'll die." Lesha began to interrupt, and Ramesh held up a hand. "A day, maybe two. By then, maybe, we can leave her with supplies while we venture on." He looked her in the eyes. "Any questions?"

There were none. They worked quickly, building a makeshift litter out of several fallen branches and the canvas from a spare bedroll that Ramesh's horse still carried. Placing Friedl on the litter, they tied her to it with several ropes. It was not a step he relished taking, but the way her eyes had been torn out suggested to him that she'd done the deed herself. Who was to say what else she would do if her hands remained free?

They pitched their tents, working quietly and competently. Ramesh set his own small one across the clearing from Lesha—an extra tent, normally meant for keeping supplies dry. He'd given his other tent to her, to replace the one that had been lost with her horse. Warden Friedl's litter they set under the canopy of a large tree, tying the remaining horse to a tree on the opposite side of the clearing. They built a small campfire and lit it with flint and steel—unspoken agreement had Lesha saving her energy in case it was needed.

They ate, and then Ramesh had first shift on guard. Midway through his shift, a sharp inhalation of air and slight rustle of cloth told him that Friedl had awoken. He looked across the clearing at her, waiting for her to move, but she remained silent and nearly still, showing no sign of her previous aggression.

Then she began to whisper something to herself, over and over, a nearly silent litany. Ramesh came closer, trying to hear what it was she said. But his presence quieted her, and he returned to his seat. A few minutes passed, and the litany started up again, nearly silent, unsettling.

The next several hours passed unremarkably, and soon it was time for the change of the guard. Stretching, her hair tied up behind her with a leather strap, Lesha came out from her tent and exchanged nods with Ramesh. He gestured vaguely in the direction of the injured Warden.

"She's awake. Not doing much, though." Ramesh stood up and fatigue flooded his limbs. It had been a full day since he'd slept, riding hard toward where Jovis had disappeared. "Wake me up if anything

interesting happens?" Lesha nodded, and Ramesh vanished into his own tent, closing the flap.

He did not fall asleep—not immediately. Instead, from his boot he pulled a piece of parchment, tied with a long, waxed string. A message from Jovis—fifteen years past. Telling him to wait. That they would find each other again—that duty, that sacrifice, could mean a whole lot of things.

Ramesh had been too proud, too foolish, to acknowledge what that time had meant to him. Twenty-three years was a long time, long enough to gather many regrets, but few had the same bitter taste to Ramesh as that one.

He stared at the paper, reading the note again, and again, and again. A mantra, across the decade. He hadn't said what he should've said then, but this was another chance. If it wasn't already too late. Folding the paper up, he placed it back in his boot carefully, and pulled his blankets around him. Sleep took longer to come than he wanted, but finally it did.

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In his dream, Jovis, as he'd been nearly fifteen years ago, was walking away, down the path, through the thick Nevarran woods. But no matter how fast Ramesh ran, no matter how quickly he covered the distance between them, Jovis was always just out of reach. Finally, he caught up with him and, grabbing his shoulder, turned him around. His eyes were gone, clawed out, and a sickening grin split his face. He reached toward Ramesh, toward his eyes, and pain erupted. Ramesh screamed.

The sound came again, but this time from right outside his tent. He leapt upright, his blade in his hand before he had properly and fully awoken. The scream came again, quieter, and somehow wetter, and then tapered off. The sound of horses whinnying in panic, in terror, replaced it, and then a snapping sound and quickly receding hoofbeats.

Nothing moved. The remains of the previous evening's campfire, a few embers still glowing faintly, sat in the middle of the clearing. Lesha's tent was still there, intact. And the litter that had carried Warden-Recruit Friedl . . .

The restraints were torn—no, not torn. Chewed through. A thin, grayish fluid traced a path through the underbrush, toward the edge of the clearing. He followed it, into the bushes, away from the camp. And

there, a dozen steps into the trees, lay the crumpled remains of Warden Friedl.

She'd chewed through more than her restraints. Her wrists were torn open, tendons and arteries gone. Like a wild animal had savaged her—but the blood around her mouth told the truth of the story. Whatever had happened to her, whatever she'd seen with Jovis, it had done its work. Lesha'd been half right: Friedl had been broken.

Something else. Her mouth—mixed with the blood, a trickle of something else. That same thin, grayish fluid that traced her path from the litter. The reek of brine, of the ocean, was stronger. More present. He cast around the clearing, finding what he was looking for—a small branch. Whispering an apology, he forced it between her teeth and pried open her mouth.

The gray fluid came out in a rush. Gallons and gallons of it spilled forth into the clearing, and he leapt back. It seemed to come for minutes—far longer, and far more, than should ever be inside a person. Finally, the flow abated, the stench of the ocean overpowering. Throwing the branch to the ground in disgust, he took several steps back, making sure not to step in the gray effluvia, and looked around.

There was no sign of the horses. The trees that they had been hitched to, sturdy saplings, had snapped in half, and the crushed underbrush told the rest of the story. They'd escaped, then, and with them went most of their supplies.

Lesha came sprinting out of the woods, staff aglow and ready to use. She saw Ramesh, came over, and her eyes widened. She ran off several feet and proceeded to throw up. Ramesh did not blame her. He'd had to fight back his own nausea.

She returned, wiping her mouth with the sleeve of her robe. She forced herself to look down at what remained of Friedl. Swallowing again, making an effort to not lose her meal a second time.

Ramesh turned to her.

"Report, acolyte." The words came out more forcefully than he'd intended, but he didn't bother correcting his tone. She spoke, eyes still fastened to the litter.

"I went to fetch more wood for the fire. But she was still alive—still here—when I left." She looked at Ramesh and made no effort to conceal the fear in her eyes. "What's going on?"

"Tell you when I know, acolyte." The sky had already started to lighten, on the cusp of dawn. He looked around the ruined camp, the few supplies that they had taken from their horses, and felt a stab of despair.

The rest of their rations were on his horse, and Maker only knew where it had run off to. Between the two of them they had two, maybe three days' worth of food, and it was another half day to where Jovis had disappeared. Not to mention water—their skins held enough for two full days, a little more if carefully rationed, but Ramesh had no desire to drink from any of the brackish streams they'd seen.

"Build a pyre. Let's at least give her a proper end. She was one of us. Died in the line of duty."

But what duty was that? Something she'd seen, something that had happened to her. And—he blinked away sudden tears—something that could have happened to Jovis. Almost certainly had happened to him. No. He would not let despair win. Would not believe that all was already lost. He dashed the back of his hand across his eyes, wiping them, and waved off Lesha's concerned look.

"'Least four days back to town. Could look for our animals, sure, find our rations, but could be we never find them. And then we're worse off—more than we are now, I mean. Jovis was fully supplied. Enough for a party three times the size of his. We're likely to find something there."

He shook his head. "I don't like this, but I don't see any other option." Lesha nodded at that. There really was no other option than to press forward. Deeper into the unknown.

* * *

No more banter. No more words. They walked down the path toward the mine, each in their own private world with only their thoughts for company. The silence was thick, oppressive, broken only by the muted sound of their boots on the muddy ground. They moved with purpose, Lesha lagging slightly behind and beside Ramesh, ready to act if necessary.

The ground became rockier, harder, and the trees began to thin. The mountain that the path now led toward unerringly loomed in the distance, its three asymmetrical peaks twisting around each other. Yet still that oppressive feeling, that smell of decay, remained, and seemed to

grow stronger as they left the forest—not weaker. And over it all, that faint hint of brine.

The path began to rise again, moving upward at a slow rate, toward those three spires of rock. And along the path, they began to see the first signs of civilization, albeit none that were recent. Mushrooms grew on a broken wagon at the side of the road. Houses, their windows dark and gaping, spotted the woods on either side of the path. Even, at one point, a village, long abandoned.

They picked through the ruins of the latter but found nothing useful. Whatever supplies had been there were long gone, either with the people who had fled, or perhaps more likely, claimed by those who had business at the mine.

There was one other thing that Ramesh noted, though he did not mention it to his companion. Large mounds of dirt, similar to the one he'd seen upon the disappearance of Lesha's horse, were scattered throughout.

He'd thought of telling Lesha about what he'd seen and heard—yet what, truly, was that? Disturbed dirt and a loud noise. He'd seen nothing else, not even the remains of Lesha's horse. Anything he told her was conjecture and would only stir her already fertile imagination.

Finally, the woods fell away altogether, and they found themselves at the crest of a ridge. Ahead of them loomed the mountain, its three peaks surrounding each other in an almost serpentine fashion. A single path led forward, its destination obscured by the hills on either side of it. They followed that path then, and turned the corner to a scene of destruction.

At the base of the mountain's slope, broken weapons, of both Warden and darkspawn make, littered the ground. Trampled tents and broken equipment told the rest of the story, as did the blood that covered everything. There'd been a fight here. A big one.

But not a single Warden body. Darkspawn corpses, dozens of them. But no evidence that any of Jovis's party had been slain. Yet the sheer amount of blood, splashed everywhere, suggested something grimmer. Darkspawn ichor was easily distinguishable, even after it had dried, but this was something different. Which meant that it had come from the missing party. Where were they, then?

Beside him, Lesha's staff was in her hands—magical energy thrumming, ready to be loosed. Ramesh had his own daggers out, an

involuntary reaction to the scene before him, and realized his own hands were sore from how tightly he was gripping the hilts.

He took a deep breath and let it out. Once, twice, three times, forcing calm. Yes, things looked grim—there was in fact quite a lot of blood, and that rarely spoke to anything good. But there were no bones, which would have been left if the remains had indeed been eaten. There was still a chance that Jovis and his Wardens were alive. He turned to his companion, making a show of sheathing his daggers.

"We should split up. Figure out what exactly happened here. Look for anything that seems . . . well, relevant." He shook his head, then added, "Looks grim, I know. But no bodies. That tells me they could be still alive. And that means we're going after them. But let's make sure there's a 'them' to go after." Lesha, nodded, her expression stoic, and moved deeper into the camp.

He walked through the center of the carnage, looking for a sign—for something to hold on to.

"Dammit, Jovis," he whispered. Despite his reassuring words to Lesha, he feared the worst. That there were no bodies meant very little, as she knew—perhaps they'd been captured, or any number of a hundred other things that meant they were dead and that this whole adventure was pointless.

Still he searched. There were no campfires, no signs of cots or bedrolls. This was meant to be fortifications, then, not a camp. There were some provisions, but no more than would last a single day. They'd expected a fight, and clearly gotten one. That they'd been overwhelmed seemed obvious—the number of darkspawn corpses was enormous. And not just hurlocks, but genlocks, shrieks, even a couple of emissaries.

But there was something different about these darkspawn. The mutations that gave rise to their mindless hordes were far from consistent. Yet here he saw variance unlike any he'd previously known. Hurlocks with extra arms, shrieks with the powerful legs of a genlock, and an emissary with a second head. Something strange—normally, he would have written it off as merely being another aspect of the darkspawn physiology that was inexplicable, but combined with everything else, it was disturbing.

"Here! Over here!" Lesha's voice rang across the clearing, carrying a note of excitement. Ramesh ran over to find her standing in front of a large hole in the earth. Peering inside, he saw stairs leading down.

Bloody boot prints—not of darkspawn, but of men. Jovis and his Wardens. The flame of hope flickered once again in Ramesh's heart.

The smell of brine was stronger here—more potent—than anywhere else in the clearing, and it seemed to be coming from below. Beside him, Lesha muttered a word and her staff began to glow. She pushed it inside the entrance to the hole, giving light to the darkness within.

The edges of the circle cast by Lesha's spell revealed a small staircase that descended into an antechamber slightly larger than the clearing above, carved with a skill and delicacy that rivaled the works of Orzammar, or even Kal-Sharok. At the other end of the chamber, a doorway and a second staircase beyond that which spiraled into the darkness, the entire space lit by the glow of lyrium. And above the entrance, written in dwarven runes, a single word—*Hormok*.

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They descended the spiral staircase. The minutes stretched on as they went farther and farther into the darkness, and the smell of seawater grew even stronger. Finally, the staircase reached its end, and another door—larger, grander than before—sat open. They walked through, Lesha holding her magical light in front of them.

The door opened into an enormous chamber, fallen into ruin, yet still no less grand for its current decay. It brought to Ramesh's mind the other dwarven thaigs, but none of those he'd seen were in as dire shape as this one. It made sense. The fall of Hormok had come centuries before, consumed by the darkspawn. Yet it was oddly, unexpectedly, quiet.

Around the chamber, the old mixed with the new, the latter being the small tents and bedrolls, as well as other signs of recent habitation. There was blood, though less of it than above, and the utter destruction was lacking. Whatever had happened here had been smaller, the battle less pitched.

Rusted shovels and picks leaned against the wall in neat rows. Skeletons, several of which had fallen to dust, wore the remains of dwarven armor. The remains of a mining party, or a Deep Roads expedition, then, long dead. But the hall bore more recent signs of Jovis's Wardens—guard fires had been lit at either end of the chamber.

He poked at the ashes of one—beneath them, a few embers still smoldered. He threw a few branches on, blew on them until the fire was

flickering once again. Preserved foods, stored in jars, sat in neat piles next to the fires, along with several baskets full of bread and smoked meat. He reached down and picked up a loaf. The bread was hard but showed no signs of mold. So, the camp had been abandoned—recently, but not too recently.

The only entrance seemed to be the door through which they'd come. Every other doorway was choked with debris, the largest opening wide enough to admit a mouse, nothing larger. Unless they'd doubled back, returned up above, there seemed no place for the Wardens to have gone.

Something drew his eye—a half dozen or so small drums, bearing an unknown dwarven mark, were piled at a comfortable distance from the fires. They seemed old—perhaps as old as the dwarves—but they were in remarkably good condition. Lesha was kneeling in front of them. She looked up at Ramesh's approach, and he raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Lyrium charges. The dwarves use them to remove obstacles, open up passages. I've seen them before, though none of this make." She stood up, absentmindedly wiping her hands on her robe. "Unfortunately, they're mostly useless without the fuse, unless you're happy to blow yourself up with them."

"I've heard of them. Never seen them."

"Not many surfacers have. They used them to open up some of the old tunnels under Minrathous." She stood up and gave him a faint smile. "Makes a big boom."

"Why here, though?" Ramesh asked, frowning. "There's a reason we don't come to this part of the Deep Roads much. Whole place is unstable—Dumat really did a number on it."

"Don't know. Mining expeditions take them along, just in case. Passage collapses, something's blocking your way. Lot easier than chipping through with a pickax. Must be careful, though." She looked around uneasily. "Like you said—place like this, not properly shored up? Who knows what you'll get."

"That sounds a little bit . . . dangerous?"

"Certainly. I understand it's fairly common among the dwarves, though." She hesitated, then added, "Good for sealing things up. Just in case you want to make sure someone—or, well, something—doesn't get out."

She glanced around the room, looking for something—the missing fuses, maybe, or a further clue to Jovis's whereabouts. Her eyes widened.

"Look!" Grabbing Ramesh's arm, she pointed forward into the darkness, toward one of the massive stone pillars.

"Right there. Looks like markings of some sort—fresh, too. See? No dust."

Sure enough, several marks had been scratched into the pillar. And—he looked at the next pillar—there, too. And then to the left. The same set of three marks had been sloppily scratched into each pillar. Whoever had done so had been in a hurry. Beside him, Lesha shifted uneasily.

"Looks like dwarven mining sign. Tells you who's been this way, when they're coming back. But I don't recognize the marks themselves," she said.

"You wouldn't. They are the marks of a Warden—well, some Wardens, I mean. Senior ones. Ferelden, specifically. Great way to keep from being abandoned in the Deep Roads. Look." He pointed to the closest pillar. "See this? Three marks. The first is a date—looks like three days ago. That's when you leave. The second's how many of you there are. Six marks means six Wardens. And the third—" He fell silent. Beside him, Lesha gave him an inquisitive look.

"What does the third mean?"

Ramesh shook his head, and there was no mistaking the grief in his voice. "That's when you expect to be back. Means that if you miss that day, they're supposed to send a search party."

On his other side, Lesha reached out a gloved hand and traced the mark. "So, when did they plan to come back?"

"That's the thing. They didn't plan to come back. This is a warning. They don't want us coming after them."

Silence filled the cavern, then, somehow more oppressive than before. The flicker of hope that Ramesh had felt was gone, buried under despair and a growing sense of unease, of fear. Finally, Lesha broke the quiet, her own voice tinged with a hint of terror.

"But we're still going after them, right? We're Wardens—that's what we do. We're not just going to—" Ramesh raised a hand, cutting off the argument.

"Don't need to convince me. I'm with you. Leave no one behind, right? There's the right thing to do and the wrong thing. Personally, I'm about the right thing." He shook his head, then added quietly, "Remember the oath. We're going down there, and . . ." Something itched in the back of his mind, and it took a moment for him to realize

what. Darkspawn. He drew both daggers in a single practiced motion. "Company."

They came from the darkness. Nine darkspawn, genlocks and hurlocks both, and led by an emissary. Yet where their entrance would normally be marked by gibbering and jabbering, these were eerily silent.

"What's wrong with them?" Lesha asked. It took Ramesh a moment to realize what she meant—they were changed. Different. One hurlock had the tail of a scorpion—another, a genlock, but with a longer, thinner skull, more avian. And then there was no more time for words.

They attacked as one, charging forward. A blast of fire from Lesha's staff caught the closest genlock full-on in its all-too-human face, sending it flying backward, its head a charred ruin.

Another genlock came at Lesha, its head narrower, thinner, jaw elongated. She threw herself into a slide, raising her staff in a two-handed defensive posture. The creature's jaw struck the hilt, its momentum shifting, and it went flying past her before it struck the wall with a sickening crunch.

The mass of darkspawn spread out, moving to separate and isolate the two Wardens, with a level of cunning and guile unusual for their kind. Three hurlocks and the emissary moved toward Ramesh, weapons out.

With a speed and flexibility that belied his years, he ducked under the swing of a brutal sword. A fist followed the sword but where Ramesh expected the fist to be there was instead a serpent's head. It snapped at him, missing by inches, venom dripping from its fangs. His momentum carried him under the blow and he rose, swinging both daggers at once and taking the hurlock's head right off its shoulders, ichor spurting from the wound.

Another hurlock blade scythed in from the left. He caught the sword on his daggers, turning the weapon away and rolling. A blast of green energy flew over his head and burned a hole through the center of the creature.

The last two hurlocks moved toward Ramesh, weapons drawn. He feinted toward the creature on the left. It took the bait and recoiled, while the rightmost hurlock lunged forward. He'd been waiting for that and caught its blade on the hilt of his dagger before shifting his grip and driving one weapon through the hurlock's chest. It slumped forward.

Fire drew a burning line down his left side as the other creature's blade caught the edge of his armor, drawing blood but nothing more. It

swung again, and Ramesh parried the blow, smashing his armored fist into its face, sending it reeling in a shower of broken teeth.

He caught the barest flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye and threw himself to the ground. A blast of fire moved through the space where his head had been only moments before. Ramesh rolled to his feet and turned to face the emissary.

It rose above the ground, massive batlike wings giving it an agility uncommon to its kind.

Keeping out of reach of Ramesh's daggers, it fired magic blasts at him as they circled, and dove at his head, swinging its long sword, using its longer reach to its advantage. Ramesh dodged, once, twice, but the exertion was beginning to wear on him.

Suddenly he stumbled, and the emissary, its screech of victory the only noise it had made, lunged forward. But Ramesh's mistake had been a ruse. He ducked under the blow, letting the creature's momentum carry it right onto his two daggers. It impaled itself on his weapons and slumped, dead, before sliding to the ground.

There was silence. The other darkspawn were dead, dealt with by Lesha. She was sitting on a rock beside him, gingerly wrapping a bandage around her torso. She saw Ramesh's look of concern and shook her head.

"Got a little cocky. Thought I had the first one off-balance. I misjudged and it got a piece of me. Oh, and it had a scorpion tail. Didn't seem to have any venom in it, though. Lucky break." She gingerly touched the wound and winced. "Looks worse than it is." She looked at Ramesh. "Why did it have a scorpion tail? And why did that emissary have wings?"

He could only shrug. "I don't know. Never seen anything like that. This is something new."

Lesha sighed, stood up. "Unless they came from the surface, I can't think of how they got in. There must be another exit—one we didn't see."

She paused, deep in thought. Ramesh was carefully silent.

Her eyes brightened. "Of course. The Warden signs." She limped to the nearest pillar. "See? First one. And then it continues." She ran to the second pillar, then the third. "It's a path. They marked each pillar as they hit it." Ramesh heaved himself to his feet and followed after her.

The markings continued for several hundred more meters before abruptly ending, the last pillar half buried in the wall. But something was

strange, different. Ramesh was the first to vocalize it.

"Notice this? Only place in this whole damned room that the floor is clear."

The debris and refuse that covered the ground nearly everywhere else in the chamber was completely gone in front of that one section of wall. Ramesh shook his head. "A secret door. I'll be damned." He frowned. "But how does it open?"

Lesha shrugged. "I imagine it opens the same way as any other door." She pointed at the bottom of the section of wall. There, almost imperceptible, were a series of grooves. Handholds, barely visible.

Ramesh gave Lesha an approving glance and she smiled faintly, some of her usual bravado restored. "Let's see where it goes," Ramesh said.

* * *

The shrill screech of stone grinding on stone filled the room as Ramesh hooked his fingers into the grooves on the giant slab and heaved upward with all of his might. It resisted, and then slowly moved, sliding within the rock above into some hidden alcove. With a grunt of effort, Lesha rolled a large boulder forward and under the door.

"All right. Back up." She did, and he released the door. He leaped backward, safely out from under the door's massive weight. It started to slide back down, before encountering the resistance of the boulder. There was a moment of uncertainty, where the doorway gouged a small groove into the top of the stone, but finally it stopped, braced open.

Warm air trickled out of the passageway—the stench of brine and decay now overpowering. Several steps in, the passageway sloped downward and seemed to curve gently inward, forming a spiral ramp that led ever deeper into the darkness. Ramesh took a deep breath, the air stinging his lungs. Beside him, the wood of Lesha's staff creaked as she tightened her grip until her knuckles were white.

"I assume this is where Jovis and his team went. Makes sense to go this way. No time like the present, right?" The confidence in her words was absent in her tone. Ramesh nodded, though his every instinct warned him against venturing down the fetid passage.

"Anyone's still alive, they'll be this way. Count out eight hours. If we don't find them by then, we come back. All right?" Ramesh said, noting the strain in his own voice. Lesha nodded.

Taking deep breaths, like swimmers about to plunge into a frozen lake, they started down the winding passageway, deeper into the darkness, deeper into the bowels of the earth.

They continued in silence for what seemed like hours, neither wanting to give voice to their fears. And soon, the lack of conversation felt like a necessity. The idea of their words echoing down the seemingly endless tunnel and awakening something gnawed at them.

The slope of the ground started to abate, then, and the walls began to take on a more sculpted appearance. Blank rock gave way to carvings—mostly too worn and damaged to make out. Lesha paused in front of one image that had largely survived. It was a simple painting of three figures—a supplicant, a priestess, and a monster. Lesha was the first to break the silence.

"This reminds me of something. What, exactly . . ." She shook her head. "Almost like Avvar cave paintings. But dwarven, maybe?" Ramesh leaned in and squinted.

"They look more elven to me. 'Least the people in the picture do, I mean."

"It's not about the people. Look, every culture has their own artistic signature—something that makes it theirs. Tevinter is all about sharp angles. Ferelden is hard and brutish, and Orlais is delicate and opulent. Dwarves are . . . well, *simple* is the wrong word, but they get right to the truth."

"If it's dwarven, what's it say?"

"Not sure. But look—it's the same image repeated, with slight variations." She pointed to another painting that was partially intact. "Three figures. The supplicant, the queen, and the monster. Except the person and the monster change. Not a lot, but a little. Enough to tell. But the priestess remains."

She was right. The creature changed a bit each time, as did the figure, but the priestess remained the same. Or at least, almost the same. It was perhaps the oppressive nature of the place acting upon his worst fears, but it seemed to him that the priestess's smile grew a little wider, and a little crueler, with each subsequent image.

His every instinct screamed at him to turn back, to abandon Jovis and his Wardens to whatever fate they had found. His training, his oath—even they told him it was too late, to turn back. There was nothing more that could be done for his comrades.

"I don't like this place. It's just *wrong*. That's the only word I can think of." Lesha's voice still carried that note of fear, but it was sharper now, more distinct. It was a sentiment that Ramesh sympathized with deeply.

But something more than duty drew Ramesh forward. Words unspoken, and something greater than a simple oath. The Wardens were his family, and Jovis had been—could again be—something more. He could no more turn back than he could tear off his own arm. If he did abandon Jovis, if he made the cold and simple calculation, what returned to the surface would no longer be Ramesh.

"You should go. Get out of here. Only one of us needs risk their life."

He started back down the corridor, before doubt and fear could change his mind. He'd only gone a few dozen steps when Lesha caught up to him. He gave her a look, equal parts gratitude and concern, and she smiled tightly in response.

They continued down the passageway. Around them, the walls grew smoother—larger. Delicate carvings started to appear, then flowers and creatures that Ramesh did not recognize. Finally, the hallway came to an end. In front of them, two massive stone doors hung partway open.

They stood there a long minute. There was something menacing about the doors. Unbidden, his thoughts turned to crocodiles—jaws hanging open, waiting for their lunch to come to them. It was yet another minute before he screwed up his courage enough to proceed. Moving together, they walked slowly, deliberately, through the opening.

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The scale of the room was vast. In the darkness, he could not tell where the room ended, but judging by the echoes, it was immense. Beside him, Lesha let out a low whistle, her fear temporarily forgotten, chased away by the scene before her.

What details he could make out in the glow of Lesha's staff were incredible. Carvings of a fineness and beauty that transcended any he had ever seen covered every surface of the cave. As a Warden, he'd seen as much of the Deep Roads as any—the greatest works of the dwarves, buried for centuries in ruined thaigs behind seemingly endless waves of darkspawn. This was something different—something more.

There was no question, in his mind, that these ruins were elven in nature. While dwarven architecture remained the rule in the Deep Roads, there were exceptions. From time to time, Wardens would find unmistakably elven architecture scattered among dwarven works.

This, however, was exclusively, entirely elven—there were no dwarven works interspersed throughout, not even any sign of the darkspawn that filled so much of the underground. And this chamber was nearly pristine.

The usual signs of age—of water, dripping from above, or pooling from below—were absent. Debris was scattered on the ground in places, broken vessels and shattered chests, but the room itself was intact.

Fluted columns receded into the darkness above, carved in patterns that seemed to shift, depending on how you looked at them, their surface smooth to Ramesh's touch, speaking to the quality of the work, and the fineness of the carvings.

On the surface of the walls were carved massive bas-reliefs, running in three parallel bands and disappearing into the darkness in either direction. The detail was exquisite, and Ramesh quickly realized that what he had first thought to be some kind of paint or pigmentation was, in fact, millions of tiny gemstones set into the stone.

The images engraved into the stone seemed almost alive, each one a perfectly frozen moment as the actors within marched through their stories.

On the topmost band, stately elven kings and queens held court, their people kneeling before them in respectful supplication.

On the middle, scenes of healing and succor, of disease and injury being drawn forth from the sick and dying by elven mages.

And on the bottom, aravels, far more elaborate and grandiose than any that Ramesh had ever seen, pulled by armies of halla toward distant mountains—one of which, he realized with a start, was that same mountain that they were now beneath, the three jagged peaks that twisted around each other easily distinguishable in the detailed carvings.

It was, taken as a whole, magnificent—and yet, the more he stared at it, the more disquieting it became. There was something slightly off—something that set his teeth on edge and his palms itching for the comforting feel of his weapons. Not one specific thing, but a preponderance of little things all adding up to an aura of quiet, deliberate menace.

The striations on the columns, random at first, began to form patterns before Ramesh's eyes. The same symbol—the horns of a halla—repeated on each column. The symbol seemed to shift, changing in an inexplicable way that made Ramesh's eyes water. He tore them away, focusing instead on the bas-reliefs that ran around the chamber. Yet even they, suddenly, seemed wrong.

The lowest band of carvings, the halla pulling the aravel, was off. The halla were different, wrong. They had too many horns, for one, and a harder, more rounded look than was normal. A look that was almost insectile. And the horns themselves were longer and ridged. Organic, somehow. And the aravels were unlike any he had seen. The windows were barred, and they bore more resemblance to a prison-ship than anything else.

The middle band, with its scenes of healing, seemed now twisted, wrong. No longer did it seem as though mages were drawing corruption and disease out of the wounded and infirm—but instead they forced it in, pushing it through and into the fallen bodies.

The expressions on the faces of those elven rulers betrayed a contempt that was almost palpable, the beatific smiles edged with disgust and disdain for the creatures at their feet. And the subjects, far from kneeling in reverence as Ramesh had first thought, seemed more to be cowering in terror.

"Fuck." A single word. Lesha exchanged a glance with Ramesh and shook her head, once. She'd seen it too, then. The urge to turn back, to return to the surface, was even stronger in this room. But a strangely rhythmic hum was growing louder and seemed to be coming from the other end of the cavernous space. One more room, then, and they'd leave.

They moved quickly, purposefully, through the massive chamber. The bas-reliefs started to repeat, the same images as before. They paid them little mind, having already had their appetite for the strange art soured. Finally, they reached the opposite end of the space. Massive doors, at least a hundred feet wide, were set into the wall. But there—to the side, the path showing signs of greater wear than anywhere else in the chamber, a smaller door, the size of a single person.

Not wanting to spend any more time than they absolutely needed to in that cursed space, they moved quickly. The door had a simple handle, its elaborate carvings worn smooth in places. The stench of decay, of

brine, was almost overpowering here. Ramesh swallowed. He had no illusions—whatever waited for them on the other side of the door was not to be salvation. Lesha gave him a small smile, but it was forced.

"Ready?"

"As I'll ever be." Holding each other's hand, they opened the door and stepped through.

Rank upon rank of twisted grotesqueries filled the cave. Each one was a twisted horror of body parts assembled seemingly at random. The fanged maw of a serpent rested atop the slender neck of a halla, moving rapidly on the limbs of a Varterral. A massive spider scurried about, its many eyes replaced instead with the heads of a dozen serpents, each one dripping venom from exposed fangs.

And in the center, a massive pool, filled with a viscous gray fluid. The scent of brine wafted forth from it. Above it, a massive lyrium crystal hung suspended. It glowed with a sickly light, tinged with yellow and green. Streamers of energy flowed from it into the pool, sending it bubbling wherever it touched.

Moving carefully, silently, they entered the room. They crept forward, as far as they could manage without being seen. When they reached the edge they stopped, taking shelter behind a large boulder made of smooth onyx—one of several that lined the upper part of the chamber, conspicuous in their uniformity and regularity.

They watched as a hurlock walked toward the pool, stiff-legged. It broke the surface of the gray ichor, which reacted instantly, flowing around the creature. In moments it was completely submerged. Out of the murk rose a cocoon, iridescent and pulsing with a green light. There was a hissing sound, a flash of light, and the cocoon shattered. Yet what came out was not a hurlock. It had the head of one, but that head rested on the body of a massive drake.

"Maker's breath," whispered Ramesh. The entire room was a menagerie of horror, each creature worse than the last. This was an army. Not darkspawn, though—something worse.

He signaled to Lesha. It was time to leave—to warn the Wardens. They turned, moving with purpose toward the exit. But Lesha, her wound still not fully healed, stumbled, her staff slipping from her fingers as she tried to brace herself. The reaction was immediate—a cacophony of sound, of voices, rose, and he could feel, more than hear, the massive stampede behind him.

And then a screech, louder and deeper than any other, filled the chamber. It was more than a noise—it was a physical force, issued from a throat larger than any he'd ever seen. And then the stone they sheltered behind moved.

It twitched and slid away. Boulder after boulder, each the same, slid past, and the creature's full length was revealed. It looked like nothing less than a massive centipede. Each segment was the size of a horse, each leg the size of a small tree. It shifted, faster than Ramesh would've thought possible, and the chamber shook with its movement. It surrounded him and Lesha, cutting off escape.

Ramesh swung his daggers at one of the segments. A white substance splashed out and onto the stone, where it immediately began to bubble and hiss. The daggers themselves fared little better—the blade that had bit into the creature was fast melting, turning into useless slag.

The creature reared up, hundreds of legs twitching spasmodically in the air, and Ramesh gripped his sword tightly. Beside him, the hum of magic, ready to be released. Ramesh had no illusions—this was a foe beyond him. But he would make it pay a steep price for his life. It crashed down toward him and he braced himself for the impact, the crushing weight.

It never came. Instead the creature jerked, spasming in midair and arching over the pair of Wardens, smashing instead into the ground beside them. The lower half rocked, sending a series of small tremors through the cavern and bringing debris tumbling from the ceiling above.

The creature twitched, thrashing side to side as if locked in battle, and started to turn. It fought against itself, its movement staccato and uneven, the actions tinged with unwillingness. Finally, whatever internal conflict it had been waging was resolved, and it turned in earnest.

The massive bulk shifted, the segments retreated, and the end of the creature—the head, or what seemed most like one—descended. And with it came the greatest horror of the day.

Where the creature's head would be, should be, was instead a humanoid figure. He sat astride the creature—no, not astride it. Ramesh realized with revulsion that the figure was part of it. The chitinous exterior flowed into the flesh, the lines between them blurred. His body had fused with the monstrosity, become one.

And the face—Ramesh knew then, with horrifying clarity, what had happened to the man he had risked everything to find. What Friedl's

warnings had meant, and why she had killed herself, rather than come back to this gruesome place. Before him, twisted and broken, was Warden Jovis.

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It was him from the waist up, but bloated, grotesque, and his flesh flowed into that of the massive creature. His eyes stared blankly, unseeing. The mouth, too wide and lipless, stretched and moved uneasily, as if only now remembering human speech.

"Ram . . . esh?" The voice came slowly, as if across a great gulf of memory, and possessed of an almost insectile buzz that tore at Ramesh's tattered nerves. The head turned slightly, and the eyes shifted—staring at Ramesh, through him. They focused—and in them, Ramesh recognized his friend.

Tears came to his own eyes, unbidden, blurring his vision; Ramesh made no attempt to wipe them away. The memory of the past, of better times spent leagues away from this place, this broken nightmare, pressed down on him, a weight of regrets and unspoken feelings. Ramesh blanched but stood firm, meeting the monstrous gaze. It blinked slowly. Behind him, Ramesh heard Lesha swallow.

"It is . . . Warden Ramesh. Yes?" The voice was clearer now. More human.

"Yes, Jovis. Yes. It's me. Maker, what did they do to you?" The Jovisthing shifted its bulk, turning so its entire body now faced Ramesh.

"We drank. Works differently for us. Can't just touch it, we need it inside. Takes a while. They turned us. Two halves, two wholes. Trying to be two ones. But I stayed me, and it hates that." It twitched, the cavern shaking in sympathy. "Not forever, not for long. Just for now—enough." The buzz returned to the voice, insistent. "And we waited for you! Oh, yes! Now you come." The creature screamed, and Jovis's voice came back.

"Can't let this out. Got to . . . bury it. Bury me." The words came even more slowly, each one being forced through whatever will battled Jovis's for control of the creature. "She cannot have it. Not again. Locked for a reason."

"Who, Jovis? Who can't have it?" The creature made a gurgling noise, and it took Ramesh a moment to realize that it was laughing.

"Same Ramesh. Always the wrong question." A shudder rippled through the monstrous bulk, and the insectile buzz was back in Jovis's words. "The lyrium. Blow it up. Take this place down. Collapse the entrance." It started to twitch again, and the next words were muffled, forced. "Stop me. Stop us." Jovis's face twisted in pain, in surprise, and he slumped forward.

Ramesh started forward, his remaining weapon gripped firmly. He could do one thing, at least. End Jovis's suffering. Just as he reached the Warden's body, however, the eyes snapped open, now black and devoid of any humanity. The creature grinned, the expression alien and horrifying on Jovis, before letting out an earsplitting screech and charging forward.

The creature's massive bulk rushed toward Ramesh, too fast to dodge, and he braced himself for the crushing force. There was a sizzle, a scream of insectile surprise, and a massive flash of light, blinding Ramesh momentarily. When his vision cleared, he saw the wall of green light between him and the monstrous insect.

Lesha's face was white with the strain. Jovis—whatever his essence, his spirit, that had animated his face—was gone, buried under the alien will that drove the beast as it pushed against the energy field she'd created. It chittered angrily, then reared and crashed down once again, sending Lesha skidding several steps backward, but the wall held.

"Go," she forced out through gritted teeth. Sweat beaded on her forehead and trickled down.

"Not without you, acolyte." Ramesh grabbed one of the darkspawn weapons that littered he floor of the cavern and hefted it. Good balance. Lesha shook her head, then said, "Warn the Wardens. Bury this blasphemy. I will buy you time." The creature redoubled its pressure on her shield, and her staff began to smoke. Her nose bled, blood trickling out of both nostrils.

The rest of the creatures in the chamber began to stir. One chimeric monstrosity, a bat with the tail of a scorpion, lunged past the shield, striking at Lesha. Ramesh cut it out of the air, sending its limp body tumbling to the ground, its acidic venom a hissing noise as it etched the stone.

More of the creatures skittered around the edges of Lesha's shield, striking at her, striking at Ramesh. The hurlock that they'd seen earlier breathed a jet of fire, singeing the edges of Ramesh's cloak, and catching Lesha in the legs. She grunted in pain and dropped to her knees. Before

her, the shield started to crack, the sheer mass of the behemoth overwhelming her reserves of energy, and it let out another shriek, this one of triumph.

Despair crept over Lesha's features, and over Ramesh's heart. This was it, then. The end. She looked at the creature, tears in her eyes. And then past it. Above it. That single lyrium crystal, as large as any he'd ever seen . . .

He saw then the shape of her plan, of her desperation. He started to leap forward, to stop her, but he was too late. The shield collapsed. The magic flew from her fingers, striking that one perfect crystal. And it exploded.

The blast sent Ramesh flying, tumbling backward. He slid across the stone ground before finally slamming into the wall, his breath knocked from him. A scream of rage, of anger, issuing forth not just from one throat but from a hundred.

The loud crack of stone filled the cavern. From above, a shower of pebbles, of rocks, and then of boulders as the ceiling began to fracture. The rock where the crystal had hung was starting to crack, the rock spiderwebbing as entire sections broke free, stalactites tumbling down and striking the ground with a *crunch*.

And then, the loudest crack of all as the ceiling finally, completely, gave way. Hundreds of tons of rock avalanched down, a deafening cacophony that stole away all other sound.

Like a series of dominos, the rocks continued to fall, stone showering down from unknown caverns above. Everything in the chamber had been buried by now, but still the rock fell, as if the earth itself sought to bury every trace of what lay beneath it.

The sound started to slacken, the deluge becoming a shower. A trickle. And then, silence. The occasional echo of a pebble tumbling down the slope of the cave-in, but otherwise, silence. And in front of him, a wall of rock, taller than the chamber. Lesha had done it. He blinked back tears.

In death, sacrifice. She had fulfilled her oath, as well as any Warden before. But Ramesh had not. He still lived. Minutes passed before he was able to stand, and it was still longer before he could tear his eyes away from Lesha's cairn. Propping himself up on the darkspawn weapon he'd taken, he started toward the entrance, a single step at a time. Behind

him, a clattering sound. A pebble. And then another. And another. He turned.

Slowly, impossibly, the stone was shifting. Rocks fell away, boulders, revealing the chitinous mass of the creature. The shower became an avalanche, the cacophony of falling rock filling the room, seeming to fill time itself.

Slowly it rose, pulling itself from the rubble, and before long it filled the chamber once more. The sound of chittering, once again, and then it turned slowly, menacingly, toward him. The face of Jovis, what had once been Jovis, creased in a smile that was in no way human.

Ramesh ran.

He ran through the elven ruins, up the colossal spiral slope. Behind him, beside him, always nearby came the chittering, the grinding sound of rock as the creature bore its way toward him. Even when his breath grew short, even when fatigue threatened to steal his legs from him, he pressed on. Finally, he emerged, sweating and panting, into the Deep Roads themselves.

For a moment, Ramesh forgot where he was. Black panic threatened to steal over him then, but he fought it down. Fought it back. *There*. The remains of the fire he'd lit when first they'd entered the Deep Roads, what felt like weeks ago. Aware that he had only minutes, perhaps less, before the hideous creation pulled its way into the light, he ran toward the casks of lyrium. Two at a time he rolled them toward that massive door, until all dozen of them sat in a clumsily heaped pile.

He remembered what Lesha had said about the fuses. Pulled the note from Jovis from his boot. Took the string that wrapped it. It would do. He took a stick from near the fire, wrapped it in cloth, and lit it. Waited.

From the depths the creature broke free, stone flying upward in gouts of earth. Segment after segment poured through the hole until it was finally free. It reared, its massive bulk scraping the top of the tunnel, and looked hungrily around the chamber. It spotted Ramesh then, and shrieked, an almost human note of triumph in that animalistic noise.

It charged toward him, covering the ground in an impossibly short time. He had one chance, and one chance only. He stood his ground, waiting, waiting. *Now*.

Lighting the fuse of the cask he held, he rolled out of the way of the creature's charge, close enough to hear its chitin rasp against the fabric of his own cloak, and threw the cask behind him.

The monster tried to change its course but couldn't, its own weight and size working against it. It slammed into the wall with titanic force, the impact shaking the cave, nearly sending Ramesh flying. It shrieked again, this time in rage, and he could hear the clattering of a hundred insectile feet as it tried to right itself.

He ran, up the spiral staircase, taking the steps two at a time. Through the antechamber he went, nearly losing his footing, correcting and leaping to the first stair, to the third. He only hoped he'd judged his timing properly, that he hadn't cut the fuse too short, or left it too—

The earth moved, and a wall of sound, like the fist of an angry titan, lifted Ramesh, throwing him out of the entrance to the Deep Roads and tumbling down the side of the hill. The screech of the creature turned from rage to pain, to despair, and weakened in volume, before cutting off entirely. Behind him, the earth shifted, the hill collapsing inward, downward, burying the creature with not just the roof, not just the cave, but the entire mountain.

Struggling to his feet, Ramesh stumbled down the mountain. Behind him, it continued its implosion, falling in on itself and wiping away that blasphemous place. Every moment, he expected to hear that scream, that insectile buzz, but it never came. Silence replaced the thunder of falling rock behind him.

Thunder came again, but it was real thunder this time. The rain started to fall—a soft drizzle, the water mixing with the tears that streamed freely down Ramesh's face. Tears of mourning, of grief. For Lesha. For Jovis. For the rest of the Wardens, whatever doom had taken them.

But tears of relief, too. He'd made it out. He'd survived—and more important, he could tell the other Wardens. Warn them about the horror. Warn them about what lurked beneath Hormok, and maybe, probably, elsewhere as well. Because he remembered something. Something about the bas-relief that he'd dismissed at the time, but which now loomed large in his memory.

The mountain he'd brought down, the one that buried that nightmare under thousands of tons of rock, was not the only one to which the aravels brought their prey. There had been, before the images repeated, eleven others.

CALLBACK

LUKAS KRISTJANSON

Sutherland took off his helmet to take in the whole of Skyhold. It was *not* smaller than he remembered.

"Every day was the best day," he said.

The three of them had arrived at first light: Ser Donal of the Hinters, Crosscut Brother, namesake of Sutherland's company; Ser Shayd, Lady of Evesol, bard of secret distinction; and Ser Voth Dale'An, free mage by special commendation. Together they were a former adventuring company of the Inquisition, recently titled and landed with a minor hold of their own. They'd been on patrol for a month, reviewing borders and meeting neighbors. They were well overdue for a rest. But when the request came, there was no hesitation: Skyhold was dark, and they were the response. The only response.

The mountain route had been clearly marked, in the way that newly forbidden trails always are. But Sutherland could have made the weeklong climb blindfolded. He'd done it before, or may as well have. Thousands had blindly stumbled up that path, braving snow and snaggled trees, hoping their way forward. Their search rewarded when the mountains parted like curtains, revealing a sprawling valley and the monolithic fortress of Skyhold.

The valley was abandoned now, spotted with the cold stones of dead fires. A hint of the numbers that had once found shelter there.

Sutherland had done better than shelter—he'd found a purpose he never doubted.

The call to return had given him another.

"Anything?" Sutherland called over his shoulder. They'd perched on a rocky overlook, but high stone battlements hid everything except the upper floors of the main keep, and the shingled roofs of the courtyard buildings.

Voth waved the end of a perception-altering spell, his elven ears twitching in annoyance.

"Nothing moving," he said cautiously. Lack of movement didn't mean the fortress was empty.

Shayd warily nocked an arrow, despite having no target.

"We should have been spotted and flagged by the caretakers." She looked at Sutherland. "It isn't right."

Sutherland put his hand on her shoulder.

"That's why we're here." He smiled. He put his helmet back on and signaled for them to move out. "Main stairs," he said.

His manner was decisive and reassuring, but really, there was no other option. Skyhold allowed one approach, and when you walked it you felt watched, and small.

"Remember," said Voth, "it will feel us."

"Good," said Sutherland.

Two numbers mattered after the Inquisition: ten thousand, and one. The first was the deliberately alarming guess of how many soldiers, assassins, diplomats, and all manner of freeblades the Inquisitor had drawn across nations. It was a massive, destabilizing militia with allegiance to an ideal, not borders. Or so the nobility feared. The second number was even more troubling to them. One, they claimed, was how many charismatic monsters it took to misuse that force. The Inquisition had to be disbanded, they argued. Not because of what it was. Because of what it might become in lesser hands.

Skyhold itself posed a unique problem. The ancient fortress had been the heart of the effort. It was too symbolic to be razed—there was only so much insult its former occupants would allow. And it was too fortified to be left for just anyone to claim. The Inquisition wasn't the first army it had hosted. The next might not be so charitably inspired.

It was eventually decided that Skyhold would be preserved, but also defanged. It would remain a distant beacon, so that all would remember

when the Inquisitor had rallied the people of Thedas against a false god, and shouted "No!" as one.

Sutherland and his company had been there, had rallied with the Inquisitor. And now they walked the valley alone, through the empty echo of that resolve.

"Feels wrong, going in without Rat," said Shayd.

"We stick to the plan," Sutherland said. When the order had come, they had set out immediately, but not directly, crisscrossing between Ferelden and Orlais. Now, on the last leg, Sutherland had split his company. He, Shayd, and Voth were marching straight to Skyhold, loud with colors raised. Rat, his dwarven squire, deliberately held back on his order.

"Right," said Shayd. "It has to feel *us*."

Skyhold stood alone in the valley, raised high on a butte, as though the mountains themselves had fallen away after failing to scale its walls. Normally a cable lift brought people and pack animals from the valley floor. But with no response from above, they had to climb the stairs that spiraled the interior of the barbican watchtower. They had a long ascent ahead of them.

Officials had promised that the Inquisition would fade away. If there was doubt, if lingering assets proved troublesome, fear and fighting over its legacy would resume. Skyhold had to be boring and safe. But the last report from the caretaker had been a meandering description of restoring the fresco, which was not at all in his mandate. The next supply caravan, the one meant to clarify that all was normal, had not returned.

Skyhold was, again, a problem.

Sutherland and his friends were the response. The only response. And he had suspicions about that. They had served at Skyhold and would keep this quiet. But if things were truly dire, they were also small enough to disappear. Why else send his tiny company against a fortress that had withstood armies?

But Sutherland had returned with purpose. He had no regrets about his time at Skyhold. He wasn't going to let "failing to protect its legacy" be his first.

As long as Rat kept pace, and they stuck to his plan.

"We still think demon?" Shayd asked. She tightened buckles as they climbed, securing hardened leather over the brigandine and silk of her tunic.

Voth simply nodded.

If this had happened anywhere else, possession wouldn't have been their first concern. But Skyhold was unusual. The Veil, the divide between the mortal and spirit realms, was very thin there. It reacted to events like water reacted to stones, and Skyhold had seen more than its share of ripples.

Sutherland spoke with every step upward, repeating the last four words of the caretaker's final report. "'I have made mistakes,'" he said. "What kind of mistakes?"

Spirits are peculiar things. They are driven by emotions, same as mortals. But spirits embody this to such a singular degree, the expression of an emotion can be a beacon, an attack, or even sustenance. It's very different for a mortal to act *with* compassion, and a spirit to act *as* compassion. And it's different again for a demon. They are even more inward, more craving. More willing to manipulate to see their flavor of emotion in action. More jealous, starved, and dangerous when it isn't.

There were many kinds of mistakes. Sutherland and his friends had made their guesses and prepared as best they could. The light at the end of their climb meant that those preparations would soon be tested.

"Line of sight from everywhere," Shayd said.

The trio carefully peered from the barbican watchtower. It was the same thick stone as the main fortress, but it stood separate, like a last warning. The connecting bridge to the gatehouse—the neck—was strong, but deliberately exposed. It offered a welcoming view to travelers and gave nobles a chance to parade. But the real purpose was to allow ballistae their pick of target. There was no cover between the tower and the gatehouse. Stepping on the neck meant exposing your throat.

Shayd pointed at the shorter battlements on either side of the gatehouse. "I'd sit up there sometimes," she mused, "there's just this access thing from the rampart. I could watch everyone." She shuddered, imagining the view of herself now, and who—or what—might be in her old place.

Sutherland had hoped for an obvious threat, but there was nothing. Even the drawbridge at the gatehouse was down. Open, like an invitation. Or a dare. He set his pack to the side of the barbican and secured his traveling cloak over it. Then he examined the cables of the lift. There had been no one to lower it, but it appeared functional. He tapped a support pillar thoughtfully. He loosened sheathes and tightened

greaves. He breathed deep. Then he threw the lever that would lower the lift.

And as the silence yielded to the shifting of huge counterweights, Sutherland stepped boldly onto the open stones of the neck.

"Easy, fool!" said Shayd, grabbing for his pauldron.

There was no response from the fortress, no volley of bolts cut him down. He turned and smiled, arms out.

"If it's a demon, it has to feel us. And besides," Sutherland shrugged, looking to the gate, the main keep, and the rotunda within, "we can guess where it will be."

The walk to the courtyard was uneventful. The battlements were empty threats, the ramparts behind them bare. The fires beneath the gatehouse—meant to sear intruders caught between portcullises—were as cold as those in the valley. The center courtyard was the most startling. Always bustling, messengers running under and then up the stone ramp that curved to the main keep doors—now it was oppressively quiet. They felt the hollow weight of a fortress meant for hundreds.

But despite it all, Sutherland was smiling. He couldn't help it. It felt familiar and light. Like stepping back in time.

He'd been a farmer most of his life, or maybe he'd just been the son of a farmer. When bandits threatened to oust his family, Sutherland ran, but not to hide. He found an Inquisition patrol and asked if they could help. If *he* could help. They said it was a local matter, but he could trek to Skyhold, make his case to their commander. He suspected that they told this to everyone, and that most never made the attempt. But he had. And he'd looked so innocuous, so inconsequential, he'd simply walked through the gates among the supply caravans. And then he was standing in the tavern, not knowing who to talk to or why they should care.

Sutherland stared up at the Herald's Rest now, wearing armor that cost more than the farm he'd rescued. The Inquisitor had taken a chance on him, on Shayd, Voth, and Rat. And they had honored every coin, plus interest. But he'd always felt like it wasn't enough. Everything good in his life—his friends, the keep he owned, the people who called him *ser*—he owed all of it to one place, one person, and one change in direction.

He looked at the dark of the tavern windows, imagining the cold of its empty hearth, and knew he had to do more. He vowed that he would.

If Rat keeps pace, and they stick to his plan.

"Donal?"

Shayd was looking at him, like she did when he was lost in himself.

"I'm here," he said.

"So is he."

When they'd emerged from the gatehouse, reflex had taken Sutherland's eyes left, to the raised courtyard that held the tavern. Shayd was pointing right, down the curve of the rookery, past the empty merchant stalls. She was pointing at the stables. At a body.

The caretaker of Skyhold had been carefully chosen. He'd been a brother of the Chantry, with only distant family and an unremarkable name. He'd welcomed long pilgrimages, and repetitive but important work. He was a patient, gentle mentor.

He was stable. And now he was nailed to one.

Sutherland, Shayd, and Voth approached with sword drawn, arrow nocked, and staff flickering with preemptive wards. There was no other movement. Even the banners on the ramparts above were still. The stables hadn't seen regular use since Skyhold was shuttered. They were so clean, they looked more like an exhibit. A model of how horses might be housed. Except for the figure of the caretaker, half standing at the stable door, attached to the frame by a large spike in his left forearm, just below the wrist.

"Maker," said Sutherland, squinting to see less.

"Dead at least a week," said Shayd. "You can tell from the eyes." She got as close as she dared, her dark skin showing how pale the corpse truly was. "He bled out."

"But not from that," said Voth, pointing at the spike. There wasn't enough blood on the arm, and with the man stooped, the wound was above his heart. He might've died because of it, but it wouldn't have drained him so thoroughly.

"Right. Pinned there, but . . ." Shayd flipped the man's cloak to the side, revealing long gashes in his belly. The wounds had long dried, but the bright red of his Chantry robe made the scene feel fresh. "Like bleeding a rat," she muttered.

"No," said Sutherland.

"It's vicious," Shayd said, turning, "but it makes sense."

"No," he said. "Look."

The caretaker was hanging by his left arm. Sutherland pointed down, by the man's right arm. There, where it would have fallen if the strength in his hand was failing, was a bloodied hammer.

"Oh, shit," said Shayd, backing up quickly.

Voth rubbed his scalp in troubled thought. "Pinned himself so he couldn't move . . ."

"Then something came for him." Sutherland warily scanned the courtyard.

"Demons," Shayd spat.

"They tempt and confuse," said Voth. "Maybe our friend realized he was being used"—Voth gestured at the spike—"so he made himself unusable."

"That's not better," said Shayd. "What would you want to avoid so bad, you'd nail your own arm to a wall?"

"Nails!" said Voth, suddenly animated, brushing Shayd to the side. He produced a small dagger and poked at the ends of the caretaker's fingers. They were as pale as his face, but the tips were oddly discolored. Voth dug slightly under the nail of the index finger and produced the result for his comrades to see.

"What is that?" said Shayd, eyeing a multicolored glob.

"Pigment and plaster," said Voth.

Sutherland looked back sharply. "The caretaker had spent a week in the rotunda," he said, quoting the Chantry report. "With some intent to 'restore' the fresco, which was not at all in his mandate."

"I have made mistakes," finished Shayd.

Demons were never trivial. It was crucial to know what kind it was to know how to counter it. To know *who* could counter it. The proud would fall to the strength of Pride. Desire could stealthily take the wanting. Rage would consume those who carelessly fueled it. There were many kinds of mistakes, and only so many the small company could anticipate.

Sutherland carefully pulled the spike from the caretaker's forearm and laid him down in the stables, covering the body with a horse blanket. Voth placed a ward to prevent manipulation by blood magic.

"Is that necessary?" asked Shayd, wanting the answer to be no.

"Can't hurt," said Voth, meaning he felt it was very necessary.

The three of them walked back past the gatehouse, up to the raised west courtyard. They surveyed the rest of the outer buildings as they went. Everything was as monkishly clean as the stables. Merchant stalls waited for wares that weren't coming. The ramp to the main hall looked like it had never seen a boot, let alone the thousands that had appealed at the Inquisitor's door. The wooden-framed tavern and smithy weren't

quite as Sutherland remembered—they were too empty. Many of the disbanding Inquisition had taken keepsakes when they left, unwilling to simply abandon the place that had so completely changed their lives. The furniture that remained was arranged for display. Chairs were neither tucked under tables, nor fully sideways as though someone had just stood. They were between, as though invisible commanders were still sitting there, turning to greet a runner. A tableau created by those charged with preservation, not those who had lived it.

"No other bodies," said Sutherland. "How many are missing?"

"Permanent staff was seven," said Shayd, flipping through a logbook. "Another ten in the supply caravan."

"Seasoned blades among them," said Sutherland, frowning. "Voth? Anything?"

"The demon couldn't get the caretaker, and then for some reason, it could. It has claws or fangs."

"That's . . . not enough." Shayd bit the inside of her lip. Bards preferred knowing too much about their enemies.

Sutherland warily scanned the balconies of the main keep, and the windows of the rotunda. "How long until . . . ?"

"Until it comes for us? Depends."

"Voth," said Shayd, exasperated, "give me *something*."

"Like we guessed from the report, it probably emerged in the rotunda. If it's hungry, and we express the emotion it needs, it'll come when it wants."

There was a sound beyond the gates, from the barbican past the neck. The counterweights of the cable lift shifted. The platform was rising.

"We can't wait," Sutherland said. "It has to feel *us*."

"Maybe they shouldn't come," said Shayd.

The words had barely left her lips when a sudden gust of wind threw the doors of the main keep open. They slammed into the stone framework, causing a ringing in their ears that seemed to change to a distant howl as it faded. The three of them exchanged shocked looks and ran forward, ready to face whatever was waiting.

Nothing was there. They stood nervously by the ramp to the doors, weapons drawn, waiting.

"Do you hear that?" Sutherland whispered harshly.

"What?" said Shayd, eyes wide.

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

Sutherland walked up the ramp and carefully peered into the great hall. Behind him, no leaves moved, no insects busied themselves in the few flowers that grew at this height. The banners on the ramparts showed no sign of the strange wind. Or any wind at all. Everything was perfectly still. A growing chill hung in the air.

"Fenedhis!" said Voth, breaking the silence with an elven swear. He waved his hand in a practiced but tense motion, small filaments of energy weaving between his fingers and his gnarled heartwood staff. He whirled, eyes closed, trying to focus on ripples in the Veil. "A demon for certain," he said, straining. "Something got its attention."

"Will it attack?" asked Shayd. She ducked his staff while also trying to watch every vantage that bordered the courtyard.

"I don't think so, it isn't—" Voth stopped turning and frowned. He opened his eyes as he abandoned the spell, energy crackling away, shoulders sagging. "I tried to get its name, but it moved too fast."

"It's not the only one," said Sutherland, returning down the ramp. In his left hand was the horse blanket he'd draped over the caretaker.

"This," said Sutherland, "was in the hall."

"Fenedhis," muttered Shayd.

Sutherland dropped the blanket and looked past his friends, past the neck. The cable lift had almost reached the top of the watchtower.

"Right," he said, steeling himself. As he talked, he tightened the vambrace on his sword arm. "We did something to get this thing's attention, and now we need to keep it, so—" He stopped.

Shayd was staring, arms crossed. Annoyed but smiling.

"We can't wait." Sutherland looked at her hopefully. "It has to feel *us*."

Skyhold had stood for millennia. It was all but unassailable, and in the right hands it could field troops across all southern Thedas. It had everything that a fortress could be expected to have. And one thing more —the fresco in the rotunda.

"When did you last see it?" asked Shayd.

They'd left the courtyard and entered the great hall, heading for the narrow corridors that weaved to the inner chambers. Every door was open, but caution made them slower than if they'd picked every lock.

"After the Inquisitor returned from the Temple of Mythal," said Sutherland, with some reverence. "The panel with the ancient elves."

"I heard there was one more," said Shayd. "It was supposed to show the victory against Corypheus."

"Didn't get the chance." Sutherland looked at her, smiling. "You know we had to leave. 'Avoid the rush,' you said."

"Keeps don't grow on trees," she offered, eying him kindly. Leaving had been a difficult decision for all of them.

"I know. I just wanted—" Sutherland stopped, raising his hand to alert the others. There was a sound, like a whisper, but not quite words. The opening to the rotunda was ahead, and the light inside was wrong. It had a greenish tinge, like he'd seen around Fade rifts. If the Veil was that thin here, that damaged, no wonder a demon got through. But what demon was it? What kind of mistake had lured it here?

Sutherland turned to his party. Voth was spinning a protective ward from the air, his staff glowing. Shayd had traded her bow for tight-quarters weapons—a pair of serrated daggers, wet with a liquid he knew not to ask her about. He gripped his long sword, nodded to them both, and stepped through the opening.

The rotunda was a stone silo more than three stories tall. It was connected to the main keep both at the base and through an upper, ringlike floor that housed the library. It was capped by the rookery, which offered a vertigo-inducing view to the ground level. It was an odd use of space for a fortress. Shayd had said it was perfect for important meetings because there were no corners to hide secrets. Whatever it was originally for, this hollow tower had become known for the fresco. Eight panels circling the room, nearly twenty feet tall each. Every act of the Inquisitor recorded in masterful plaster and paint. From the explosion that had marked the Herald, to the triumph against a blighted false god. All painted by Solas, the Inquisition's expert on the Veil and the Fade beyond. It was his gift of record. At least, that's what was claimed at the time.

The rotunda they entered now was not fastidiously clean like the rest of Skyhold. The floor was splotched with the muddy brown of old blood. Far above, cages that once held messenger birds strained with unfamiliar weight. Each was stuffed with body parts. Droplets fell infrequently from dismemberments that were not fresh. There was a desk in the center of the room, the same that had been graced by the Inquisitor, Solas, and countless dignitaries. Now, though, there was only one occupant. A single, unmoving body.

"The caretaker," whispered Voth, nodding toward the corpse.

As quiet as he tried to be, Voth's words seemed to carry and change. They merged with a sound in the room, the same whisper they'd heard outside, now moving around the inner wall.

"It's the plaster," said Shayd, unable to look away.

The fresco seemed to gain depth on the wall, the layers of plaster shifting with a dry rasping sound. The whisper without words. It was subtle at first. In the first panel, a coal-black shadow moved behind the Breach above the Enclave, the explosion that had marked the Herald. The second panel was the Inquisition symbol, marking its foundation: a vertical greatsword, sheathed by the eye of Andraste wreathed in fire. Red pigment scraped itself from the stylized pupil and slid down the gray blade. More blackness crawled from two carefully detailed wolves that guarded the symbol, leaving them pale and dusty.

There was rush of air, as violent as the gust that had slammed open the door outside. This time, however, it pulled doors and furniture inward, smashing debris against the rotunda entrances.

"Oh, you piece of—!" Shayd threw herself against the off-kilter mess that now blocked the passage out. Her weight barely moved the pile. Voth joined in, using his staff as leverage, but added little to the result.

Shayd looked to Sutherland. "Get your shoulder in it!" she demanded.

Sutherland shook his head. "We won't get through there until we go through that." He gestured at the shape moving across the fresco.

Voth nodded, resigned.

Shayd uttered a frustrated growl, kicked the rubble one last time, and readied her daggers again.

The mass of plaster and shadow was still growing, stealing pigment from the third panel, the short triumph before the destruction of Haven. It continued to the image of the false god Corypheus—formerly such a figure of dread—and drained him like the wolves. Each event that had shaped the Inquisition was being stripped of color. The sound grew harsher, like a crate of porcelain pots in the back of a wagon, sliding against each other.

And as the trio turned, watching and predicting the movement, its purpose became clear.

"The eighth panel," said Voth.

The eighth and final panel of the fresco, meant to commemorate the battle against the blighted magister Corypheus, was unfinished. It showed only rough shapes, outlines that the mass of color crawling around the room now rushed to fill. And as detail and depth emerged, something was wrong.

"That's . . . not what I pictured," said Sutherland, confused.

The story was well known—the Elder One, the false god Corypheus, had torn a hole in the sky to steal power from the heavens. He couldn't be killed until his blighted dragon was dead, and the Herald, the Inquisitor, had somehow countered with a dragon of their own. And there *was* a dragon on the panel, with an Inquisition blade in its neck. But according to the story, both creatures had fallen first, leaving the final victory to the Inquisitor.

But here, unfinished, was the outline of a beast that stood over both dragon and sword. This was not the battle, or the victory. This was after. And the beast was not a dragon. The outline alone might have allowed that assumption, but now, filling with black and red, it was something other. The creature was reptilian, but also canine. The snout was blunted and toothy, but edges came to a point in houndlike ears. As the mass of plaster filled the shape, it began to rise, revealing scales and tail, and paws with talons. It looked like two figures painted on either side of a pane of glass, then viewed together, their forms confused. A wolf that had absorbed a dragon, and now stood crooked over all.

With a sickening *crack* it separated from the wall, from the victory. It was suddenly a full and imposing physical creature. It turned to look at Sutherland and his company.

"That's too many eyes," said Shayd, ready to throw a dagger and pluck one out.

And then she stopped.

"Shayd?" said Sutherland. He needed to know she was safe, but he couldn't risk taking his eyes off the creature that now stood independent from the fresco.

Shayd didn't answer.

Voth was on Sutherland's left, and had begun a spell that hurt just to feel it cast.

And then Voth was also still and silent.

Sutherland tried to put himself between the demon and his frozen friends. He eyed the room, looking for anything that would help. Except

for the desk and the body of the caretaker, it was a bare circle. There were three entrances: the one they'd used; one that led outside; and one with stairs that circled upward within the walls. All were blocked. Sutherland looked up the unscalable walls to the rookery above. He couldn't see through to the outside, but the cages reflected tiny slivers of light from unseen windows.

There was a hint of movement, something just past the lip of the rotunda.

Not yet, Sutherland mouthed to himself. He had to keep the demon's attention. Make it feel him.

He banged his sword against his cuirass, then held it before him. He stared the creature in its too-many eyes and let his worry for his friends make him as threatening as possible.

"Creature!" he spat. "Name yourself and what you've done!" He would have seemed formidable in any other situation.

The beast regarded him in silence, looming, and then its plaster lips spread into a smile far too quickly.

"I am the heart of what was here." As it spoke, it raised an arm—one of three—and pointed at the fresco panels in order. "An echo that has breached the Fade." The creature's arm finished its path at Sutherland's friends. "And I can still the bravest blade or magic."

The limb folded into the creature's layers, each movement adding to the rasping sound. It rose to its full height, as high as the panels would've allowed, and bellowed its name so loud that dust fell from the walls.

"I am Regret!"

Shayd wasn't in the rotunda anymore. She'd raised her dagger a feared and respected bard, but when her hand lowered, she was fourteen and running through an alley in Dales End. There was a voice ringing in her ears. She knew it well. She knew every word it would say, and how cruel they would be. Because it was hers.

"You'll never be anything!" Shayd screamed, not turning back, because this was the moment that meant she never could. "You'll never be anything!" said her worst fear, and every hate she kept for a life that couldn't do more than scrounge and hope.

And far behind her, a mother cried her true name.

Voth was lost in the woods, which wasn't new. He wasn't good at this. He'd chosen books, neglected his tracking, and his knots never held. Ahead was the open road. He had his satchel and his maps, and he'd find

his way to Val-whatever. And he would rarely speak, because then he'd have to tell.

And far behind him, a bear in tangled ropes crushed a brother into blood and dirt.

The rotunda was thick with plaster dust as the demon moved. The creature seemed to reshape itself with every step. It lorded over Sutherland and his immobile friends, its voice a dry, hurtful rasp.

"There is so much of me that's here," it said, clearly not regarding the trio as a threat. "So much Regret behind these deeds." It paused, looking at the hole it left in the eighth panel. "I wonder if you know the dread that's coming?" Regret seemed wistful in that moment, like a child the night before Feastday, anticipating promised candy. It closed on Sutherland, smiling.

The young warrior let his sword dip as the thing approached, and it got so close that he could feel the dusty breath of its possessed form. He held perfectly still.

"The actions here have scarred the world," said Regret, distending arms to point at both Shayd and Voth. "You saw the rise and felt the fall." A third arm cradled Sutherland's head, removing his helmet, examining him like a cherished thing. "Why would you risk all your lives and return now?"

Sutherland smiled, remembering how every day in Skyhold had been the best day. Remembering his vow, why he'd returned, and always would.

"No regrets," he said.

Sutherland's blade was in the creature's chest before it could react, and with every ounce of strength he had he drove it to the hilt. The impact pushed the demon backward, and it stumbled on legs it had yet to master. Sutherland pulled his sword back, the blade stained with paint. Regret crashed into the desk and fell with the caretaker's body, flailing like it couldn't tell where its own form ended and the corpse began.

"Shayd! Voth!" Sutherland yelled, but his friends didn't move. If he'd disrupted the demon's influence, it wasn't showing yet. He shouldered them closer together so they'd be easier to defend, and readied his blade once more. He'd been lucky, landing a strike that would kill any mortal creature. But demons aren't mortal, and he was already banking too much on luck.

Regret raised itself unnaturally, its body simply re-forming into a standing position, like a shadow rising without a wall. It looked at Sutherland, but there was no smile this time. It snarled a toothy growl, a sound that—like its shape—was somehow between wolf and dragon. Regret touched the wall, and more plaster from the fresco joined its mass. The wound in its chest remained, but it filled and discolored with new material.

Sutherland glanced upward. More movement. And then, from over the lip, a gloved hand, its thumb raised. He smiled inwardly.

"What have you done to my friends!" Sutherland demanded again.

"They are lost within themselves, at moments when a choice was made." Regret narrowed its many eyes at Sutherland. "What are you that makes you stand apart from them?"

Sutherland had the creature's interest now, and chose his words slowly, deliberately. "We thought we'd find a demon here. Didn't count on you." He paused. "But we liked our odds." He gestured grandly at his frozen friends. "Voth envies no one. Shayd has seen pride defeated more than once." Sutherland cocked his eye at the demon. "And me?"

He walked to the right, arms open to the damaged fresco. "These events that you stole from? I lived them. Here, in Skyhold." He turned to the opposite wall, stepping theatrically, owning the space between the demon and his friends. "You think you're made of this?" Sutherland pointed at a panel—the intricate fall of the Grey Wardens. Next to it, the fate of an empress. He paused, suddenly thoughtful. "These things shaped me long before you."

Sutherland set his jaw with Pride and Anger—demons he didn't need to avoid right now. He stepped back, carefully positioning himself to the opposite of where the gloved hand had been. "There is *nothing* here I regret," he said, utterly certain. He stood defiant, raising his blade.

"And *you* can't fool me."

Regret snarled, stooping to grab the body of the caretaker, hefting it up like it weighed nothing. Voth's ward caused a shock to ripple through the demon. It hurled the corpse across the room, slamming it into the wall with a sickening thud.

"You think you are immune to me?" Regret screamed, its voice cracking like brittle pottery. "Think that you can take my toys? There is no place where you can hide from my will!" The demon curled its lips in

effort, and a spasm shot through Voth and Shayd. There was no awareness in their eyes, but they raised their weapons.

"Maker, no," whispered Sutherland. He knew how demons manipulated, how they turned allies against each other. Regret had probably done exactly this to the caretaker and his staff. And Sutherland couldn't help but think, that as much as he would've regretted it later, he'd rather nail his arm to a wall than hurt his friends.

"Their regrets can only grow!" The demon laughed. "Cut them down and you are mine!" It gestured, and Voth and Shayd turned, their faces contorted, as though the spot where Sutherland stood contained something that terrified them.

Regret smiled far too wide. "You know I've won, so how will you respond now?

"Hey, nug-rutter!" yelled a voice from above.

The demon growled and looked up to see two figures standing on the lip of the rotunda. On the left was Rat, Sutherland's dwarven squire, her pale features obscured by a helmet worn low. She held a shrouded container nearly a third her size. Beside her was another dwarf in a short cuirass and long blacksmith's gloves. She had mid-length red hair, and a headband that supported an odd face shield half-helmet. She and Rat grinned wide.

"We've got your response!" smiled Dagna, former arcanist to the Inquisition.

"Now!" yelled Sutherland.

Rat heaved her burden—a large glass amphora—off the lip of the rotunda. It hummed as it fell, the contents a swirling mass of angry yellow and black.

Sutherland tackled his friends.

Regret raised two of its arms and successfully snagged the container out of the air. It laughed in triumph and glared upward, but its celebration was premature. A rune in the bottom, Dagna's handiwork, sparked red and the amphora shattered, sending shards and angry insects into the demon's face.

And then all was chaos.

If Sutherland's strike had shaken Regret's concentration, Rat's bees obliterated it. The demon became a roiling mass, blinded and flailing. The debris that had blocked the entrances to the rotunda fell to the

ground. Several cages also dropped from the ceiling, smashing on the desk and spilling limbs around the floor.

"What in the—!" yelled Shayd, waking to find a dismembered foot in her lap.

"Glad to have you back!" said Sutherland. He leaned in quick to kiss her cheek. Shayd grabbed him, her eyes closed. Like she needed to know he was real.

Voth sat up behind them, holding his head. Regret was a mass of limbs and eyes surrounded by bees. Dagna tossed lightning runes from the lip of the rotunda. Rat had just tipped a bookshelf over the ledge, and he watched it land on the creature with a muted thud. Sutherland and Shayd were kissing. The two passages out were clear. The fresco was draining color.

Voth got to his feet and lurched toward an exit. "It's strongest here!" he yelled, focusing only on what mattered. "Lure it out!"

"What?" yelled Rat, balancing a chair on the ledge.

Sutherland jumped up. "Get it outside!" he yelled. "We'll rally out there!" He pulled Shayd to her feet and started after Voth.

They didn't make it to the doorway. Voth stumbled, his arm over his eyes, as though he'd suddenly run into thick forest. Regret had recovered and was pointing at him, trying to worm back into his thoughts. Another arm extended toward Shayd. She shook her head angrily but couldn't move.

"You will stay and face your choice!" Regret reared up, twenty feet tall. "I am all that you have done! And my will is such that you—"

A chair crashed on the demon's head, interrupting its rhythm.

"Hands off my knight!" yelled Rat.

The demon righted itself. "Your mistakes are mounting here! Beg and I will—"

Thunk! Another chair cut it off.

Rat waved at the demon.

"I am the regret of a god, you—!"

A rune stuck to the bottom of the last chair exploded at the creature's feet.

"Pbbbbth!"

Regret screamed in rage, slammed its arms into the walls, and heaved itself upward. Huge slabs of plaster and stone fell in its wake.

"Oh, pebbles!" said Rat, diving backward through one of the upper corridors that joined to the main keep. The demon clawed after her, sending even larger stone fragments crashing to the floor. It scrabbled over the lip of the rotunda and was gone.

"Language." Sutherland smiled, and picked up his blade to follow.

Voth stopped him. "We can't just run out there," he said.

"It's after Rat," said Shayd. She stepped forward, glowering. "I owe that thing."

Dagna joined them from the stairs, immediately distracted by the fresco.

"It's in our heads," said Voth. "We can't let it see us."

"I didn't come here to disappear," said Sutherland, tapping his chest.

He was annoyed, but not at Voth. Sutherland had suspected that they'd been sent here to fail. To confirm that Skyhold was a problem, and then just disappear. To give officials license to permanently erase the Inquisition's legacy. He wouldn't have it.

"We have a plan." Sutherland gestured at Dagna. "Rat brought the others in. We have to move fast."

Sutherland knew a demon would be trouble. But he couldn't ask for reinforcements without confirming the problem. He needed more like him. Loyal enough to be quiet, small enough to go missing. They had crisscrossed the border, gathering people. The ones who had called Skyhold home. He'd told Rat to hold back, bring them in quiet while he distracted and assessed. They were all supposed to rally and take back the fortress. Be the response.

"It's not like you thought," said Voth.

Sutherland looked down. He'd thought being in Skyhold would be enough. Like old times. It was enough for him.

He turned to Dagna. "Everyone knows what it is?"

"They probably heard in Denerim. That thing is loud." She paused. "Bees aside, I don't think we know what to do."

Skyhold wasn't enough. Sutherland turned to his friends. "I'll go first," he said, "but we need to get out there."

"What about Rat?" said Dagna.

"Rat's a runner," said Sutherland. "She'll run."

***

Rat ran through the library, crossed the second floor of the great hall, and ducked out to the garden balcony. The garden was a walled square. It was large enough to provide the fortress with herbs and alchemical plants, but was mainly designed for contemplation and morale. The main keep loomed on two sides, and there were multiple doors on two floors. There were no stairs down on the east side. Rat's side.

The door behind her exploded, and the bulk of Regret forced itself out into the daylight. Rat hopped to the garden wall, edging forward. The demon followed, looming, smiling. It seemed more feral away from the fresco, less articulate. It extended an arm.

"Pebbles," said Rat, and she was in the Deep Roads, huddled behind a low stone mound. It was dark, and that was good. It meant she couldn't see. But she could hear.

"I smell you, little one."

She kept her head low. She always kept her head low. And she would run.

And far behind her, darkspawn claws ended a paragon's line.

"Back, you toothy shite!" said a man's voice, thick with accent and anger. A hammer arced through the air, hitting the demon in what passed for its shoulder. Three of its seven legs slipped into air and its head dropped, its jaw smashing on the garden wall. It scrabbled angrily, found no purchase, and slipped into the garden, out of view.

Rat blinked and reeled away, falling in the opposite direction. She tensed and waited for the cobblestones of the courtyard. Muscled arms caught her, absorbing some of the impact before collapsing with her.

"Easy there," said Harritt, once-blacksmith to the Inquisition. His leathers now bore the mark of an Orlesian guild, but a trade with Crestwood had brought him back to Ferelden, and into the path of Sutherland's company and Rat's second group.

Harritt smiled through his mustache, then grimaced. His knee had turned painfully beneath him.

"Peb—" Rat started.

"Little one!" roared the demon from the other side of the wall.

Rat covered her mouth, eyes glassy.

"Not going well, aye?"

Rat shook her head. "It doesn't like me."

"By the sound of it, it doesn't like much." Harritt stood them up, but once they were righted, he had to lean on Rat's shoulder. Rat picked up

his hammer and they moved slowly toward the main keep.

"Let's find your—" Harritt shook his head, muddled. The demon had mounted the garden wall and caught a glimpse of him.

Rat tackled him into the darkness of the tunnel beneath the great hall doors.

Regret deftly stepped down from the wall, learning its limbs. It prowled and sniffed, but something caught its attention in the Herald's Rest. It paused, its face trying to look in two different directions, largely succeeding. Then it loped away.

Rat kept her head low.

***

"Morris!" said Sutherland, his smile a mile wide. "You're a sight!"

Sutherland had raced out of the rotunda to the central courtyard, straight into a familiar face. Ser Morris, Supplier of the Greater Vals. He'd been quartermaster to the Inquisition and turned that honor into a network that armored southern Thedas. His mustard hair now had a hint of stressful gray, his lean torso a hint of luxury. He frequently traveled the border roads. Roads he now regretted.

"You certainly know how to liven up a man's life," said Morris. "No, sorry, I meant shorten."

"It looks bad," said Sutherland, "but we're not done yet."

"Done? I don't know how to start." Morris looked at his pushcart. He'd wanted to help, but on this trip he'd traveled for trade, not supplying a hunt.

Sutherland put a grateful hand on the man's shoulder, then turned and whistled. They were joined by Voth, Shayd, and Dagna.

"I'll make it right," said Sutherland. "We need to set up where it can't see. Lob attacks."

"It won't be enough," said Voth, "this creature can—" He was cut off by a crashing sound in the west courtyard. Rat and Harritt hobbled out from under the ramp to the great hall.

"It's in the tavern," Rat choked.

"The tavern?" said Morris gravely. "Maker have mercy on it."

The Herald's Rest had served many on the first day of their freedom, and the last day of their lives. It was not a place where doubts were

allowed to linger. One man had seen to that, before he'd left to build his own border roadhouse.

Regret smashed through the main doors, looking for the movement that had drawn it. It found a plainly dressed dwarf, bald, with a short dark beard and groomed mustache. He was calmly wiping the bar.

The demon reached, feeling many threads of regret. It paused, considering its meal.

"Casteless," it said, "you have done things."

"Save it," said Cabot, former operator of the Herald's Rest. He raised a bottle as if proposing a toast, then stuffed the bar rag down its neck. "I'm a bartender. I drown regret."

Cabot lit the rag off a candle and hurled the makeshift cocktail at the demon. It landed by its feet, but the creature easily slid itself backward to avoid the low flames. It smiled and readied an arm, but hesitated when a tightly corseted elf stepped from behind the stairs. Her brown hair was long but tied severely, her features calm but sharp. She held a small pouch that she opened with a sharpened fingernail, revealing a sparkling silver powder.

"Careful," said Cabot, gesturing to Elan Ve'mal, former apothecary to the Inquisition. "She knows you, but she's just a carrier."

Cabot dove behind the bar as Elan gently blew the contents of the pouch across the flames. The powder ignited into a gout of fire that left white ash across the seared face of Regret. It screamed as its surface cracked, sections of plaster glazed hard. The damage was superficial, but the creature was enraged that it couldn't see.

Elan skirted the flailing creature, and she and Cabot ran for the door.

"Beautiful as always, my dear," said Cabot.

"Tsst!" Elan replied in her way, as he loved.

Regret's scream had rattled all of Skyhold. Especially the lower courtyard, where Sutherland's plan was falling apart.

"It'll come out of there spitting mad," he said.

"We can't just pile on," said Shayd. "It'll turn us against each other."

"Have we even hurt it?" said Dagna.

"It's Regret," said Voth. "It finds your doubts, feeds on them. Gets stronger."

"Finds you? Like darkspawn?" said Rat, regretting mocking the creature earlier. The demon roared in the tavern.

"That!" said Voth, pointing. "Don't do *that!*"

Rat cringed and tried to think of baked bread.

"But I did hurt it," said Sutherland. "By the fresco. I impaled it. That wound stayed."

"You chose Skyhold," said Voth, "It attacked the one thing you've never doubted."

"We followed you here," said Shayd. "It's not the same."

Sutherland let the talk fade into the background. He looked around at the fortress where his life had changed so thoroughly. But it *wasn't* Skyhold that had changed him. He'd have been in the kitchens if it hadn't been for one person. The Inquisitor had taken a chance on his potential. But more than that, the Inquisitor had stood for him. For them all. Made them feel like they were worth it, and could help. Made them look forward.

Sutherland swore under his breath. Of course Skyhold wasn't enough. He'd brought people back, but that wasn't the same as inspiring them. He'd looked backward, thought only of what *he* needed. He looked at his friends as they argued. He'd let them down. It felt awful. As bad as he'd ever felt. And then, he saw potential.

"Shayd!" he yelled, shocking everyone into silence. "What did it make you see?"

"What?"

"Regret," he said. "You were ready to *attack*. What did it make you see?" Shayd looked down, silent. Her lip quivered.

"That bad?" said Sutherland.

"The worst. My worst."

Voth and Rat nodded grimly.

Sutherland looked across Skyhold. Regret roared. It would wear them down, pick them off. He had to show them they could win.

"Right," he said. "It heals fast, but it *can* be hurt. I need to hit it hard. Do you trust me?" He looked at all his friends in turn. "Do you all trust me?"

They looked back, confused, as if to say, *Why waste time asking, of course we do*. All except Rat. She saluted.

"Good," he said, "because I need you. I need you to guide it to me. And no matter what happens, you work together, and I'll stand for you."

Cabot and Elan looked down from the edge of the west courtyard.

"Are we killing a demon?" asked Cabot.

"With some help," said Sutherland. "Think you can piss it off?"

"Inevitably," said Elan.

"Right," said Sutherland. He turned to Rat. "Get its attention. Run it to me at the stables. Don't think, just run."

"It doesn't like me." she said timidly.

"Fast as you can." He put his hand on her shoulder. "Trust me."

Rat looked down at Harritt's hammer, still in her hands. She took three slow steps, then ran under the ramp, head down.

Sutherland gestured up at Cabot and Elan. "Keep it off my squire."

They nodded and ducked back.

"Arcanist," said Voth, "join me by the gate?"

"Save me a piece for study," said Dagna, waving as she followed.

"I'm a bit hobbled," said Harritt, "but with a fast cart . . ."

"We'll throw what we can," said Morris nervously.

Sutherland watched them go and readied his sword. Shayd stared.

"What about me?" she asked.

"By the stables," he said, avoiding her gaze. "Where you can watch me."

She grabbed his shoulder, turning him so she could see his face. Her eyes widened. "You're going to let it get to you."

"I'm taking a chance," he said. Sutherland took her hands in his. "I'm standing for them. If it goes wrong?" He placed her hands at her hips. On the hilts of her daggers. "Don't let me hurt them."

"You're not enough," said Shayd. "Not alone."

He smiled, and gently brushed a smear of plaster dust from her cheek. "I'm not alone," he said. He heard the chaos beginning in the upper courtyard and smiled. Then he turned, heading for the stables. "We're the response. I'm responding."

Regret flowed out of the tavern doors. Its eyes had re-formed, and it blinked in the sunlight. It looked for prey, for the doubts it needed to heal itself.

It found Rat. She was standing in the center of the courtyard, her head low.

"I run," she said, her fists tight on Harritt's hammer.

"Little one," said Regret. It stepped forward. Fire erupted to its left. It didn't bother to avoid it. Cabot was half hidden by a barrel, but his presence and nature were no longer a surprise. The demon extended an arm, and Cabot fell to a knee. Elan readied her pouches, but another arm stilled her as well. Too many eyes looked back at Rat, annoyed.

"I run!" she yelled, shaking.

"Good," said Regret, and leapt.

Rat rolled to the side, head low. The demon passed, bemused. When it landed, it didn't bother turning its body. It simply re-formed, its head facing backward. It loped after her, toying, snapping.

Rat turned past the tavern to the south wall. She ducked down a small set of stairs but was soon exposed in the center courtyard. The stone closed in, became the Deep Roads, but it didn't matter where she was. Her knight had asked her to run. So she ran.

Regret was puzzled, then growled low. It had briefly enjoyed toying with her, but this was unexpected. It focused and Rat slowed, but she didn't stop, and it was no longer amused. It bounded after her. Straight into a gauntlet of her friends.

Voth hurled ice from the gate, his staff crackling with frost. The ground grew slick in scattered places, and Dagna tossed runes, charging the earth with lightning. Rat weaved between, but the demon couldn't keep its many legs clear. Shocks traveled up its body, enraging it. It turned to face them, and something hit it from the opposite direction. Morris pushed his cart past with Harritt perched atop, throwing housewares. Another shock, another volley. Cabot and Elan stirred. The Rat wouldn't stop. More distraction, more noise.

Regret had had enough.

Sutherland was at the stables. He touched the frame where they had found the caretaker, tracing the blood with his finger. He thought of the Inquisitor.

"You stood for us," he said quietly.

Shayd shifted nervously on the nearby stairs. The stairs to the kitchens. Where Sutherland could have started, and now, where he might end. He smiled at that, then turned to look down the length of Skyhold.

"Just like you," he said to himself, and he walked forward, slowly, deliberately. He saw flames at the Herald's Rest. Chaos in both courtyards. A demon turning, growing arms for each of his friends. Even Dagna's smile faded. All because he'd brought them here.

Sutherland stopped, and held his sword upright in front of him, the blade flat against his forehead. He closed his eyes and breathed deep.

"I regret!" he yelled, as loud as he could.

The demon froze, its dragon-canine ears twitching. It was split seven ways, trying to still all these mortals at once. It was frustrated, frenzied. But Sutherland's call was like a beacon.

"I regret acting alone!" yelled Sutherland.

Regret turned to face the young warrior, its many eyes shifting around its head, centering on him. The one it couldn't touch! It could kill them all in turn, but this new sensation was so tempting, and so familiar! It was as if Sutherland was echoing the regret that had drawn it to Skyhold in the first place. Its arms grew more talons.

"I regret using my friends!" yelled Sutherland.

The demon sneezed like it had been doused with a strong spice. It ran at Sutherland, leaving his friends, passing Rat. And as it ran, it reached, and easily plucked at Sutherland's open mind. It drew out the doubt that would give it leverage and sustenance. The fool wasn't even looking! It hated and pitied these mortals so much!

Regret leapt at its prey, teeth and talons bared like a bramble.

Sutherland's eyes were closed. He seemed helpless. And then, like his friends had said, he saw the moment of his greatest regret. The moment that made him doubt more than anything. He saw Skyhold, his friends hurting, and a demon.

"I regret now!" he yelled.

Sutherland turned his sword edge-on. He set his back foot, braced his weapon against his shoulder, and leaned in. And he let Regret come.

Regret expected resistance. It had never been accepted. Never owned. What started as a leap was now a forward fall, and it flailed against its own momentum. It hit the blade jaw-first, bisecting body and cleaving limbs. The creature split wide.

Sutherland was quickly enveloped, surrounded and buffeted by animated plaster. And for a moment, he had the strangest view of his life in Skyhold. Fragments of the fresco passing before his eyes, corrupted by the demon, now severed again. What had he done?

His sword began to drag in the heart of the beast, forcing him back. It found the gap between gorget and pauldron and cut into his shoulder. He fell to his knee, the weight of Regret wearing him down. But he kept going. He stood for his friends. Even from the ground, he'd stand for them.

"Just like you."

Regret washed over Sutherland. He fell backward, tumbling. And then all was quiet.

He blinked.

He was on his back. The sky was pale and clear overhead. The banners on the ramparts were still. The chill remained. Sutherland's head and heart were pounding. Had he failed? Had Regret healed as fast as he'd cut? He didn't know if he had another strike in him.

Then he heard something moving. Many things were moving. He propped himself up on one arm and looked behind him.

The demon was reeling. It hadn't been cleanly halved, and a third of its bulk trailed behind it. It was missing several limbs and was having trouble forming more. It was reaching, searching for the doubts that would heal it, restore its strength.

It had found Sutherland's company, and it went hungry.

Shayd was a blur. She rolled in low, ducking talons, and punched a horizontal cut with her left blade, opening it wide by lunging up with her right. Her daggers were wet with a liquid he knew not to ask her about, and it seared Regret with alchemical hate. Voth swore in elven and channeled a spell that hurt just to feel it cast. The demon's surface rippled and cracked as will became pain. Rat ran between, swinging Harritt's hammer, mashing a foot into a painted stain on the cobbles. They cut and cast and crushed together, and every wound stayed.

Sutherland had joined the Inquisitor and never regretted it. Sutherland's friends had joined *his* company, and he'd just reminded them why.

The demon scrambled backward from the onslaught. It would reach the rotunda. It would sleep and plan and come back stronger. This was all their fault. They would learn how smart it was. The regret that had drawn it to Skyhold had a very long memory.

And then it hit walls made of flames and runes and a half-filled cart. Dagna and the others blocked its escape. They were the little people, who supposedly didn't matter. But inspiration had once made them the heart of Skyhold. And now they were again.

Regret stood no chance. The doubt it fed on had evaporated. It flailed and gasped, and its legs crumbled beneath it.

It fell to the ground by the main gate, and was still.

Sutherland shakily got to his feet. "Did I miss anything?" he said.

He stumbled.

Helpful shoulders were instantly at his side, supporting him, swarming him with relieved handshakes and backslaps. Everyone crowded.

All except Shayd. She stood, daggers at her sides, still furious from the fight. She brushed a hand across her nose and sniffed.

Sutherland wondered if he'd rather face Regret again.

And then her daggers were on the ground, and she was in his arms, almost knocking him over. He held her as tight as he could, despite his bloodied shoulder. And as the chaos faded, he felt the pall cast over the fortress—the cold and stillness—start to lift. He'd done more, just like he'd vowed. It had just taken a while to realize what his promise truly was.

And then they all looked back at Regret.

Its dismembered limbs were now strange piles of dry plaster. Some of the pieces were large enough to see details of the fresco. A careful hand might paste them all back on the wall, restore it, though that didn't occur to anyone in the moment.

The core of the creature lay on its side, its too many eyes drifting unfocused. It could re-form, given time, but at this point even a few simple wounds would return its mind and will across the Veil. For a moment, the sunlight illuminated something within—a sliver of the spirit that might have been. Not the opposite of regret. A different flavor, or shade. Contemplation. Introspection. It felt the echo of the actions that had summoned it. *There might have been a better choice*, said a thought it had not been allowed.

Sutherland limped into its view, as did Voth, Shayd, and Rat. Dagna was collecting fragments for testing. Ser Morris kept his cart at a discreet distance, despite Harritt urging him forward. Cabot and Elan reminisced behind his bar.

"Go quietly, spirit," said Voth, without judgment. Then he brought the small blade from his satchel and stabbed the demon in the side, holding it there.

Shayd spat and said nothing. She picked up one of her daggers and drove it deep, staring the creature in the eye. She would never say that it felt good. But it did.

Sutherland hesitated. Regret would linger, he knew. You couldn't let it just lie there. For a moment he thought of the farm, his father, and the day he really left. The demon stirred.

"I knew I'd known you once before," said Regret.

"That's not my mistake you taste," said Sutherland, returning to the present. "It's yours." He pushed his sword down, leaning on the crossguard.

The demon chuckled, its body flattening, layers of plaster losing tension. "Succulent," it wheezed. It glimpsed the spirit realm beyond the Veil, and a faraway glimmer. Familiar, and somehow far brighter than what had drawn it here. It knew where it would go.

Rat stepped up, her head high. Sutherland looked at his squire, at his company, his friends. He smiled at the direction he'd tried to give them. Like he'd been given. Regret had taken Skyhold—they were all his response.

He nodded at Rat.

Rat hefted her hammer, brought it down on the demon, and a lazy breeze blew in the garden.

By order of the Most Holy, Her Divine Victoria,
you who have served are to be commended.
And though the Herald guides you no more,
and legion and name are retired,
know that you served good and true.
Change comes, both to and because of the Inquisition.
And we are blessed with the ability to accept and move on,
to leave dread and regret behind.
Know that Skyhold remains, its fires bright.
Forevermore it is where you are from, not where you are bound.
Attempt no travel there.
Let the past guide you to a new direction.
And be well.

LUCK IN THE GARDENS

SYLVIA FEKETEKUTY

I've been called many things—a liar, a knave, a scoundrel—even a hero, once or twice. I don't like being called *lucky*, though. That comes and goes, and it's best not to be superstitious about it.

"Oh ho! A Lord of *Fortune*, shunning luck?" Very funny, you wits. *Luck* is twisting things to your own good, or noticing when they go well. Aren't we lucky to be here this evening? To sit by a fire, with a barrel of beer rolled out of the cellar an hour ago and a circle of what I might call the best drinking companions I've had for some time here in Dairsmuid? Ones, I might add, who are very kind to so patiently listen to me begin this humble story.

Because for all I've just complained about it, maybe luck was with me in Minrathous. I'm not sure how I survived that city otherwise. Have another round with me, for I'll need it to ease into the remembering. Minrathous! Oldest and most astounding and most vile place I've ever made coin in.

***

Give me the fresh coasts of Rivain over any city, and Ferelden's strapping lads over any other kind, but you have to be impressed by Minrathous. It *towers*. Their titanic buildings block out the sun. Some even float in the

air, kept there by ancient, crackling magic. From the incense-spewing temples to the stink of the slave markets to the dragons carved across every inch of stone, history bleeds from the rock. Its crowds are like nothing you've seen either, a sweating, shouting, arguing, laughing river of people sloshing through the streets.

And let me tell you: every Tevinter noble's breeding goes out the window when their palanquin's stopped behind a broken ox cart or dance troop. Some of those swears sounded like they came from the dawn of the Imperium.

Now, beware of who you steal from in Tevinter, and not just because they somehow found a way to make prison crueler than in Starkhaven or Orlais. You slip a purse from the wrong belt, and it can be a hapless bodyguard or a cringing maid who gets blamed, for everyone there knows slaves are shifty. Maybe it doesn't bother you, but a Lord of Fortune's got to have some standards that sets them apart from common glory-seekers, and that's one for me.

Therefore it was with great pleasure I spotted a man wearing the vestments of a slaver, clearly alone, yelling at a pair of lithesome dancing girls to move out of his way. After a tumble and cringing apologies ("Watch yourself, man!" "Pardon, sir, pardon!"), I slipped away with a pouch of coins he had no right to anyway.

I'd been given a tip on where to find information for a job in the city. I made my preparations, and changed. I fancy myself decent at disguises, and I know my way around a cut of clothes. Makeup and wigs I learned on a stage in Ferelden, and an elven friend taught me posture and how to curl a voice high or low. She said I had "an uncanny vocal range," although she had me beat on accents. (To this day, I can't match her knack for imitating a Free Marcher's brogue.) Through this tale, people call me *sir* and *madam*, but I've always just thought of myself as myself, and had great fun in the bargain.

Well, of course I can also disguise myself as some of the other peoples. There are things the mind focuses on first, you see. We recognize dwarves by their width as well as their stature. Elves are slim, but it's their eyes and ears we recall. Humans have the most variety in the shoulders, and all anyone sees about quanari are height and horns—

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What was that? Yes, you're right. Enough boasting about my craft now. Back to the story. I waited at an inn that stank of the fish being gutted on the dock, until the moon topped the towers of the Archon's palace. Then I made for a tall, skinny building like hundreds of others around the docks.

As I slipped along the paths by the canals, the low fog curled around the water. There were splashes. Not unusual. But combined with the way the fog moved, it bothered me after a while. It was as if there was something stirring up the mist I wasn't that fast enough to see. It didn't help at some point I thought I'd heard a sigh, coming out of some dark grate by the canal. I told myself it was nerves, just some fish looking for a way back to the sea, when I came across a splash of blood caking one sloping brick wall.

I stared dumbly. The blood, still wet, was sprayed far up the brickwork. It could have been a gutted fish flopping about, or the remains of some fellow in a bad way. Looking back now, I'm not sure that's all it was, but at the time I pressed on. If I'd known what was going to happen, if I'd been able to read that omen, there's a good chance I'd have run to the docks to throw myself on the first boat out of the city.

***

When I eventually got to the tall building that was my target, the door was forbiddingly barred. So I crawled through an unlatched, painted window three stories above. Sorry? No, no ropes. Only pitons. Five years in Master Ignaldo's Fabulous Circus of Rivain will cure you of a fear of heights, one way or another.

Anyhow, what looked like a salt-encrusted clapboard building from the outside was just as dull inside. For the first two floors. Someone had converted the third into golden-pillowed luxury. Velvet couches and silk-covered lounges sat arranged like they were awaiting a party. Marble side tables held goblets and pitchers and crystal bowls. An enormous table of solid oak, polished and glossed to a sheen, had been hauled up three flights by some unlucky sods. The last extravagance was dozens of globes of colored glass strung from the ceiling that clinked as I brushed them on my way down.

A cabinet full of bottles was a fraction less full after my inspection, but only a fraction. I had to stay sharp. I retreated into the rafter ledge,

where I could see and not be seen. After an hour, some elves—dressed like paid servants, not slaves, to my surprise—arrived to fill the bowls with fruit and the pitchers with wine. For light, they chimed metal sticks against those glass globes, which began to glow.

Oh, that sort of magic is everywhere in Minrathous. What they consider mere conveniences would delight and amaze us poor barbarians.

The servants left, and soon after their masters swept into the place. Not all of the finely dressed mages were magisters of the imperial senate. Some were only breathtakingly wealthy. The sat down at the table, and a servant brought out a pack of cards, and the camaraderie began.

"It's your turn, Manius."

"Come on, man, take your drubbing."

"I think he's saving that for the Sighing Pearl this evening."

There was raucous laughter, and Manius threw down a hand that was decent but not enough to beat the table. Another round began. I was pleased my informant's word was good: this *was* a secret game of Wicked Grace for the slumming elect, mages who'd discreetly set up a club in the last place anyone would look for them. As the mages bet on piles of coins that would make a miser weep, the group was jovial and chatty as a flock of birds and snippy as Orlesian dowagers.

* * *

"Xanthin! Work on the latest treaties a bit slow lately? You've hardly a tan this summer."

"Whatever you think, Palletra, it's going perfectly."

"I hear Otho's having trouble with his nephew again."

"One has to admire the lengths he's gone to hide it. It's rather touching."

"Speaking of family, a cousin of mine just came from Vyrantium. Did you hear what happened to Forfex the Wigmaker?"

My back and neck grew stiff as I waited for hours until the boozy conversation circled around to what interested me.

"Did you see those flyers plastered on the door?"

"I can't believe they've increased the asking price for that monster, or demon, or whatever it is."

"Did Eloranna put up that reward for its body? She's been buying all sorts of creatures lately."

"One of the colleges must be footing the bill. Some new exotica for the senior enchanters to brag about at the Archon's next ball."

"Still, five thousand aurum? The beast must have killed someone important to increase the price accordingly."

It hadn't, as far as I knew. A few hours' careful work with a quill and some blotting paper had produced a passable forgery of the notices plastered all around the dockside. I had inflated the price in order to grab attention, and pasted the false flyer on this building and the surrounding streets. My hope was it'd catch these well-connected mages' interests, and steer their conversation toward what they knew about the monster. Well pleased it'd actually worked, I risked crawling out a bit farther, so as not to miss anything.

"Well, let's hope someone catches it before the grisly thing starts picking its victims from higher in the city."

"Perhaps the templars could prove they're worth the Chantry's levies and hunt the damned thing down."

"I bet you this 'monster' is a common demon let in by some lazy oaf."

"No shortage of them up in the towers."

"Oafs or demons?"

"I heard it's something to do with the Venatori."

That felled them. Every mage looked up from their cups or cards and turned to a skinny man with a topknot. His expression puckered.

"Don't look at me like that." The man threw down his hand of cards. "I quit them ages ago."

"Come now, Castillius." A mage with a curled mustache and trim beard smiled at him. "We all know you didn't go *south* with the cult to fight the Inquisition. You wouldn't be here if you had."

"Exactly!" Castillius looked relieved. "I only attended a few meetings. The Venatori had some powerful magisters, you know. I was curious what they had to say."

"Of course. Just the same curiosity that makes you take supper with Magister Dulcia now and then. Always keeping those options open, yes? Very sagacious."

***

From Castillius's sour face, I assumed Magister Dulcia was part of the Venatori cult. You never heard of them? Really? Power-grubbing fanatics

who wanted to "restore the glory of the Tevinter Imperium" or some slavering nonsense. Their possible involvement excited the mages at the table, who all spoke at once. I crept a hand's span closer.

"Is this a Venatori abomination, then?"

"What've those idiots done now?"

"I say, Dulcia hasn't married again yet, has she?"

Castillius waved a hand. "I'll only speak if you stop baying." They quieted. My supporting beam creaked for one heart-stopping moment. I swallowed, but no one below noticed.

"This is all I know. The Venatori didn't make the monster, or wake it. They just encountered it during a search for some old cave under the city. It is *not* a demon, and it killed every mage in their expedition. Dulcia said the Venatori didn't put up the reward for the monster. Not that she's Venatori," he added hastily. "But an interesting thing that her connections told her—"

That was the moment my wood beam cracked. With a shout, I turned my plummet into a series of artless skips down the wall, before I hit a blessedly soft couch like a lead sack.

The silence stretched awfully. My head was buried in sequined pillows. Then I heard the mage with the mustache, loud and exasperated: "Andraste's sacred bowels. You're supposed to be keeping lookout!"

I popped my head up. The mage was in front of the couch. He winked one gray eye at me, then declared: "You *know* my mother's been trying to discover this little hideaway before her son fritters away the family fortune. Why did I put you up in the rafters if not to watch that road for her servants?"

I threw myself on the ground in front of him, sniveling and craven. "Forgive me, my lord! The wood looked solid, but was rotten."

My presence explained away, the other mages at the table were either chuckling or growing bored. A statuesque woman with blond hair fanned herself with her cards. "Is she with you, then?"

"Oh, yes, Mae." The mage threw up his hands. "Honestly, if dear . . . Hollix wasn't the finest markswoman I've ever seen, she'd be scrubbing pots the rest of her days. No cuts? Broken bones?"

"Only the shame of my failure pains me, my lord."

"I get the idea." He sighed heavily. "This has rather spoiled the evening for me. I think I'll take my leave, ladies and gentlemen. Come along. Hollix."

I picked myself up, bowed without looking into anyone's eyes, and limped after. My savior's retinue was waiting below, the same servants who'd prepared the place. We went out into the street, where he turned to me.

"I admit it's a bit of a put-on," the mage said. "Upstanding Tevinter mages sneaking off from their spouses or paramours to play Wicked Grace in a 'dangerous' part of the city, armed only with magic and an army of servants. Still, they think it spices up the evening's entertainment. Dorian Pavus, by the way. Fabulous acrobatics back there. And you are?"

"I've taken a liking to Hollix."

It got a laugh. "Hollix was the name of my mother's dear departed pet nug, you know. It means something like 'irrepressible rascal' in old Tevene."

"A fine pedigree."

"Let me invite you to supper. I promise if I'd wanted to cause any trouble, I'd already have done so. Besides." He plucked a flyer peeking out of my vest: one of the reward notices with the conspicuously altered price. "I think we have something to talk about."

***

I had a very good light supper in a suite of white-marbled rooms above and away from the docks. We were so high you could see over the trees of the public gardens. They were fed by an enormous, round reservoir, covered in carvings of bellowing dragons that towered over one end of the greenery. As people strolled along the bowers, the plants flickered with light.

No, it wasn't just lanterns. I mean *light*. Glowing leaves. Dorian finished his glass. "They say Minrathous never sleeps," he told me. "It does, but only when the sun rises and everyone needs a good break from all that exhausting skullduggery. What do you think of the gardens?"

"Are they magic?"

"That light show certainly is. Personally, I feel it ruins their mystique." He noticed me sip from my cup. "The wine's a gift from a dear friend. Lady Montilyet sends me a few choice bottles from her vineyards. But as a Rivaini, perhaps you're obliged to scoff at an Antivan red."

"Their wine is decent," I allowed. "A Lord of Fortune doesn't take Antiva and Rivain's rivalries so seriously. Where's the glory in it?"

"How *does* one make a living as a treasure hunter?" He paused. "Wait, that answers my own question. Allow me to rephrase: How does one *survive* a living as a treasure hunter?"

"It's different for everyone." I drank some more of what was in fact a damnably excellent wine. "But you'd be surprised how often common sense just gets in the way."

My glass was somehow empty. Dorian nodded at a servant, who floated up with a pitcher. I remarked that he was the first mage of his station I'd seen whose household employed servants, not slaves. Dorian grimaced. "It's relatively recent, I'm ashamed to say. Someone I met in the south . . . changed my mind on the matter."

"You certainly came back home with some fresh views," someone behind us said. I turned to see the tall, splendidly dressed woman Dorian had spoken to at the card game sweep into the room. She had such a presence! You turned to her like you do the first breeze of spring. "Magister Maevaris Tilani. Don't let the title frighten you off, darling. Dorian and I are on the outs with most of the rest of the Magisterium, if that helps."

She held out a hand. I lifted it and kissed it lightly. "You grace Hollix, this humble servant, with your presence."

Maevaris smiled, curly gold locks bouncing as she shook her head. "This one's trouble, Dorian. It takes a special sort of charmer to make a compliment like that work."

Dorian waved his goblet at the couch. "My guest and I have been getting on splendidly."

"You must be." Maevaris sat, looking at me as she tilted her head at Dorian. "He's not one to invite just anyone up here."

"Your very attentions flatter, magisters."

"You've never been a servant in your life, have you?"

"Not long," I conceded to the shrewdness in those eyes. "But the practice has come in useful from time to time."

Dorian stretched and sighed. "Well. That's enough wine and scintillating conversation. We have business."

"We're skipping the friendly gossip?"

"You only want to talk about the Magisterium. Why you love seeing me so raggedly depressed, Mae, I can't understand."

"Our duty to our country means being well-informed about it." She shrugged. "I mean it, dear heart. What has you worried?"

"This." Dorian put the reward paper on the table among the three of us. It would pay out five thousand (all right, one thousand) aurum for the body of the monster slaughtering people on the docks, delivered to the imperial offices that settled monster bounties. "Do you know who put up the original, much more frugal reward?" Dorian asked.

"You?" I ventured.

"A quick learner! Or a good guesser. Either way, I've been hoping someone with promise would show up for this."

"How come?"

Dorian looked annoyed. "It's *killing* people. We're not all heartless up here, few that we are. I don't like the idea of something like this in my city."

Maevaris picked up the paper. "Neither do I. You overheard us at the card table, Hollix. The mages there won't do anything about this monster until it snags one of their own. That's not likely to be soon, if ever."

I eyed the iron staff Dorian had propped up in one corner. *Hrm?* No, I'm no mage. But I'm a decent judge of equipment, and the shaft had chips and scratches that looked like they'd been earned in battle. Maevaris wasn't armed, but no mage in Tevinter's ruling body can't fight their way out of a corner, I know that much.

"Why not hunt it down yourselves?" I asked them.

"As much as it distresses me to say it, politics. There's foul rumblings in Tevinter's Magisterium and we've been spending all our time keeping an eye on its scoundrels." Dorian sighed. "You saw some earlier. Mae and I are trying to win a few of them over."

"It's been slow." Maevaris put the flyer down, still elegant, still relaxed, but with a harder undertone. "But we're giving them a chance to prove they're not *complete* fools."

I nodded, uncomfortable with the talk. Well, wouldn't you be? Enjoyable as my hosts were, I was eager to move away from Tevinter politics to a threat I could actually see.

"Tell me about the monster," I said.

Dorian produced a map. It was a wonderful piece of work: crisp letters, bright inks, and a master's eye for details. "There's been nine people killed so far, here, here, and here. Each was found decapitated. The criers and balladeers have charmingly dubbed our killer the Cekorax,

which is a rather suspect kludging of the old Tevene word for 'headsman.'"

Dorian rolled up the map and presented it to me inside a cylinder decorated with indigo sapphires. Any doubts I had that he was good for one thousand aurum evaporated. "Here. I'm afraid that's all I have."

"Be very careful, darling." Maevaris looked serious. "There's no shortage of creatures that have become *changed* by magical experiments in this city."

"Not to mention Tevinter's naturally occurring enchanted predators," Dorian added. "They're all dangerous, cunning, and usually hungry."

"You don't think the Cekorax is an exception," I said.

"No," Dorian replied. "Especially considering the guards never found its victims' heads."

***

I thanked Dorian for his generosity then ransacked his storerooms for a few items, though I'm not sure he discovered that until I left. Then I slept off the bruises from my tumble at my inn. It was brightest noon when I woke, but the thought of one thousand aurum dragged me out of bed.

I headed to a garment-making district. The last killings had happened in that maze of red stone, behind the dye pots and rows of looms. I worked my charm, and redistributed the contents of the slaver's purse. There was one tricky moment, when a pair of thieves thought I might be a scouting rival. After I explained I was a Lord beholden to Fortune, looking for the Cekorax, they laughed darkly and wished me luck.

Talk? The weavers happily talked. People living in fear are in a mood to gripe. Sorting through the rumors, someone seemed to have escaped the monster and lived. I let it be known I wanted to speak with them, found shade in a wilting palm grove, and took out the reward flyer. Every place people had been killed was close to water and off the main roads. Unfortunately, that covered half of Minrathous. I needed *something*.

Someone dropped a fruit pit on my head. "What are you reading?" a peevish voice asked.

I looked up and saw a child squinting down at me through the palm fronds. With children, you'd best decide how you want to deal with them

right at the start and see it through. Since she looked bored, I went with honesty.

"The city needs a monster killer," I told her, waving the flyer. "I've killed monsters."

"You can't kill that one," the girl declared. She had a missing tooth and a dark face speckled with freckles, like a spray of rain. "Nobody knows where it is."

"How do you know nobody knows?"

"I listen to people." She said it with the air of one talking to a well-meaning dolt. "Besides, if they'd seen it, they'd have drawed the monster on the poster."

She had me there. "Isn't that a bit high?"

"Nope." She swung all the way upside down by her knees, then up again. The girl was dressed in fine-looking rags. Something scavenged from a good home. "Bet you can't do that."

I shrugged and crouched, then sprang up the curved bole of a palm tree and summersaulted backward to land in the thick crown of the palm next to hers. Their fruits were purple and red. "Is this one ripe?"

The girl closed her jaw, and considered. "Take the other one, that one's got spots."

I did, and bit. The bulb was warm and soft and had a tang under the sweetness. Wiping the juice off my face, I said "Tell me, young lady—"

"It's Mizzy, mister."

"Mizzy. What do you know about the Cekorax?" I waved the paper again.

"Well . . ."

"Yes?"

"It killed my friends." She tried to sound matter-of-fact. "Templars took the bodies away to burn them, but I snuck in before that happened and I saw them laid out in rows on tables and their heads were all gone."

I stopped chewing. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right." The girl studied her hands, stretching out thin arms. "They weren't closest friends."

"I'll kill the beast that took them, on my honor," I said, trying to sound gallant. Then I cursed myself. Why I promised *that* tall order to a child, I don't know. "Can you tell me what the Cekorax looked like?"

Mizzy shook her head. "When it happened I was on my way to my sister's, who's such a good cook she got freed and now she cooks for

money, and I was on Bluehook Street because my friends live there with their ma and pa at the rug merchant's back house. And I was by their canal when I heard shouting and screaming and there was something in the water but when I told my sister and she got the guards, everyone was dead."

We digested the picture in silence. "So you didn't see anything?" I eventually asked.

"Not much," she answered. "But I know how the monster got in the house."

***

Mizzy took me to a sewer behind the shack her friends had lived in. The grate was tall as three men, but barred. I expressed doubt anyone could cram themselves through, but Mizzy insisted the thing she saw had "slithered back" that way. Looking at the map, it was true every victim had been killed near one of those gigantic gutters. Farther down was a hole, big enough for workpeople and such to fit into.

Do I hear you repeating that old adage with a smirk? It's true some of Minrathous's upper streets are paved in marble, but her sewers stink like everywhere else's, believe me.

I waded through the tunnels. Some minutes in, I saw part of the walls glow. A sickly blue, like you get from deep mushrooms. It trailed in strips across the walls and ceiling, as if someone'd dipped ropes as thick as your arm in paint then dragged them along the masonry. The glow was bright enough to show me bronze plates stamped by the ceiling with the names of less-fragrant streets above.

The farther I went, the brighter the glow. And I started hearing something. Not splashing. Faint and coarse. It came when I was moving, and stopped when I didn't. That made me take out my saber, which is what saved me when the Cekorax came.

I was going round a turn when a thrashing mass of tentacles shot out of the cracks and water. I yelled and slashed, lopping off a dozen grasping, roiling feelers. The thing's wormy bulk swung, and milky flesh peeled back to reveal . . . I don't know. A blade? It was silvery, but air bent round it like cleaved space. It slashed arcs that cut the rock behind me like soft butter.

I ran. Ropes writhed along the ceiling after me, and some of them opened up *eyes*, ordinary people's eyes studded into the flesh like jewels on a fancy sword sheath. The Cekorax's voice was many voices speaking together, all tiny and softly rotten.

"Slip gently." A rope of tentacles splattered behind me. There was a delicate noise like air tearing. Part of my cloak fluttered into the muck. I ran faster, legs pumping. The thing loped off more cloth, like it was playing.

"Stay with us," it cooed. It's hard to explain the joyful malice radiating out from it. You could *feel* it, like cold in the winter. *"Come inside, where it's warm. There is room in the crown of the blind."*

Still running, I twisted to block with my sabre. The air hummed. I felt a sting on my cheek, and my blade fell to pieces. Weaponless, bleeding, lungs on fire, I dug out something I'd cobbled together from the supplies from Dorian's storehouse, and threw it hard at the Cekorax.

The secret of smoke pellets is this: Never throw them by your feet. Aim at whoever or whatever is chasing you. Preferably at the eyes.

Black, oily clouds bloomed out of the pellet satchel, filling the tunnel. It saved me, but not the way I'd thought. I peered back, still running, to see the damn monster bunching its tentacles around inky curls, prodding and palpating the stuff. It was examining the smoke. Whenever its pale limbs touched each other they fused together. When it flexed, they split and re-formed. Others tangled up, slowly reabsorbing as they lazily rippled through its main, wormy mass.

I tell you, friends: I still can't enjoy a plate of octopus after that.

I made it around another corner, but heard *"Come back, visitor,"* as loud as if the Cekorax had been breathing into my ear. I saw a lone tentacle roping across the pipes above me. *"I am a sweeter ending than you know. Things are rising."* It modulated down to a whisper and unsheathed its silver. *"Stay safe inside of me."*

I scooped up a brick and threw. There was a satisfying splat, and the crumpled thing shot backward, leaving a trail of bright-glowing slime behind it. At last, I was by an exit. I scrambled up the ladder and slammed the iron cover down. I hadn't come out on a street, but the bottom of a stairwell. No worries, I thought, as I lurched up, blood trickling down my face. I'd climb a hundred staircases before I went down *there* again. So long as this place was dry and safe, I was for it.

Which is how I ended up stumbling out of a storage closet into a templar barracks.

***

Only water left? Let's get another barrel, shall we? Much obliged. Where was I? Right.

So I spent the next fifteen minutes dodging armored brutes trying to throw me in jail for "trespassing with malicious intent." That's what they shouted, anyway. The templars in Tevinter, unlike the rest of the world, lack the ability to stop magic. They're only guards with fancy equipment doused in lyrium. It gives them chips the size of trees on their shoulders, if you ask me, and might explain their surliness.

After dodging the chase, I scrubbed myself clean on a weedy beach. It washed off my makeup, but better salty and wind-chapped than wear the stink of that sewer for another moment! Wrapping my face in a scarf, I returned to the inn so I could change my clothes, give the old ones up for burning, and examine the map of Minrathous.

Right then I felt someone else should sort out that monster, money be damned. But I did feel obliged to at least give Dorian Pavus a location, a description of the Cekorax, and a hearty handshake before I left. So, after a blessed change of clothes, I set out to find the building that stood over where I'd met the Cekorax below. I certainly wasn't going back to the sewers, but I could give Dorian the rough location before I fled the city.

So I went by Minrathous's many stairs and crenellated walkways, avoiding canals and cesspits completely. In defiance of my encounter with the Cekorax, the sun was shining brilliantly. The map led me to an enormous terrace suspended over a swarth of climbing, glittering plants and trickling fountains. These were the vast gardens I'd spied from Dorian's suite.

What's that? Yes, to my surprise. Even in the sun, the plants shimmered with light. It was subtler in daytime, but gave everything a sort of jeweled look. All this sat above the Cekorax's lair, a solid three floors above the ground. Despite the sun, as I walked past statues of stern magisters, a melancholy settled over me.

A Lord of Fortune doesn't like giving up. True, this wasn't some glorious jewel, begging to be freed. It was a monster I couldn't fight. If

I'd had a crew with me . . . but I didn't. Not in that city. I was dressed in an Orlesian mask and cloak, which wouldn't attract much attention from strutting mages, so I decided the gardens would be my last taste of Minrathous's luxury.

There was laughter in those gardens, and rose bowers, and loops of Arbor Blessing, and sweet apples with their own perfume, and vendors hawking sticky figs rolled in nuts, and a pool lush with dawn lotuses. Waterfalls showered the ponds, thanks to cleverly hid aqueducts ferrying water from the looming reservoir. Tiny butterflies flapped everywhere. An illusion, I learned, when a flock passed harmlessly through my arm.

Where's that next round? Good! Thank you kindly.

My wandering took me to a stand of trees around a pond. Thick birches, studded with large holes the way they get sometimes. Birds had built nests in them. I peeked at one. Empty. The next two were likewise. There was another deeper in the stand. I walked a few lazy paces, and peered in, and was met with a nest of bones. Bodies of a dozen birds of all sizes, headless, had been piled carefully to form a dome. It had a grotesque sort of style. The birds were all turned the same way, as if the flock was chasing itself down.

I stumbled back into the clearing. Only grabbing a branch saved me from dunking my idiot arse in the pond. The birch next to me shuddered, and I watched as a white tendril slid out of a hole in the bark and opened up a wet, brown eye.

The Cekorax tittered. I slowly continued, step by questing step, retreating back onto the main stone path. Some of those birds' necks had been freshly bloody. I felt unshakably it wasn't some old collection. The Cekorax had placed it there in the clearing, fresh, just for me.

As I walked in a slow daze I could now see the faintest undercurrent of blue in the hollow tree trunks housing the Cekorax, snug as a spider. The more I looked, the more I picked out its coils running behind the grass by a wall, around the base of trees, perfectly camouflaged in the hanging vines.

I tried not to shake. I and everyone strolling along were surrounded by a perfect predator. The Cekorax was nestled throughout the entire gardens. Whatever I'd seen below was the smallest part of it.

"Visitor," its pulpy voice whispered, as I edged to the gates. Eyes suddenly blinked on a strand of ropes shifting in the shade next to me. *"Watch."*

Far down the path was an elven slave trudging after a chattering mage. A tentacle slid through the grass and flicked the hem of the elf's robes. He stopped and looked around, puzzled. Nothing there. He didn't see the second appendage rear up from a thicket, fraying open to reveal a cutting edge.

A jug smashed into it. I barreled in, loud and doing my best imitation of an Orlesian accent. "Sirs! Watch out, please!"

The mage turned. His surprise quickly became annoyance. "I'm sorry?"

"A venomous drake-adder!" I leaned on my legs as if tired from a short run in my thick dress, shaking my head. "I didn't think you had them in Tevinter!"

"What are you on about?"

"See here?" I lifted the bush. There was a smear of milky blue, glowing softly in the shade. "It is a most poisonous snake. We have many in Ghislain. I am afraid I only wounded it, but the animal was preparing to strike."

Well no, I can't do anywhere near a *Ghislain* accent. I've never been to Ghislain. But see, neither have most people in Tevinter.

The Cekorax's "blood" left a powerful stench. The mage sniffed the air. "That *does* smell foul." He backed away. "Well, thank you, madam. You've saved me the trouble of training up a new amanuensis, eh, Florix?"

Florix kept his face carefully straight as he gave a strained laugh. "As you say, master."

They left, taking a causeway out of the gardens and into a colossal tower in the curved shadow of the reservoir.

"Fortunate." The Cekorax gurgled, too close beside me. It didn't sound angry. I can't tell you why, but I had the feeling I amused it. Why shouldn't I? I hadn't done any real damage, grabbing that watering jar and hurling it. As in the sewer, I'd just managed to slow it down.

The gate out of the gardens was so close. Could I outrun it? Would it let me go? Would it permit me a few steps, then lop my head off and hide my body in a lotus pond?

"No more false faces. No masks. Become soft and blind in the crown of me."

That energized me. My art is my own, and no Maker-forsaken thing was going to take it. I ran past the gates to shade and freedom.

"There will be others." Maybe I imagined it, but I thought I heard something wistful, as the Cekorax added, *"They will be joined in me."*

***

I shoved my way through the crowds, heading for the docks. I'd send a letter to Dorian, I told myself. At least he'd believe me. I was done with the place. This wasn't my city. As if to agree, there was a whip crack, and a cart of dull-eyed elves and humans in chains lumbered by. I lurched to the left, seeing freedom in the sails of the clippers and galleons preparing to depart with the tide.

"Hey! You!"

Silver flashed off an armored templar pointing at me. I was just as floored as I'd been by the Cekorax. A second-rate templar seeing right through one of my disguises from several houses away?

"Look there!" the templar cried. "It's the one with that fancy map case!"

Ah-ha! I was only a dolt carrying very recognizable jewels. I ran.

This time it was harder. The templars had me pegged for a serious thief. Sorry? Well, yes, *true*, but I hadn't stolen anything worth the run they gave me. I vaulted up and across rooftops with an ease that had the crowds clapping, but there was always a templar in the next street, a silver fist on the walkway. Eventually I was cornered in a short alley by six of them, their swords and maces ready.

There's no one who looks as cross as a templar you've just made run several city streets in full armor.

I tried to decide between running up sheer stone or begging for mercy before hitting one in the eye. Then someone dropped a golden flask on the templars' heads.

There was a *pop*. Lightning sizzled. The templars yelled and beat at their armor.

"Up here!" a voice hissed. That urchin, Mizzy, was hanging out a window. I could reach it with help. I ran, jumping onto one of the templars. Lightning flashed. I felt like I'd been bitten by a snake, but I pushed off the howling woman, teeth gritting, and my fingers found the ledge.

Many rooftops later, I was satisfied we'd lost them. I turned to thank Mizzy, who was staring.

"What were you doing at the docks?" she asked.

"How did you know it was me?"

"You've got that map case." She peered at me. "You were moving different, too, until the guards saw you."

"Have you been following me?"

"I'm bored. Your skin's all painted."

"Orlesian custom," I said, touching the heavy makeup with a finger. "This shade by the neck is all the rage in Val Royeaux. What was in that flask?"

Mizzy took another flask somewhere out of her clothes. Something crackled inside it like a miniature storm cloud. "I run messages for a chemist mage who makes them and sometimes she throws out bottles that don't work right and she doesn't care if I take them. S'magic. It makes you faster when the lightning comes out. Did you know lightning hates metal?"

Minrathous! A city where magic's so common it gets thrown into a gutter. "Well, thank you."

"Were you going to leave?"

"No," I lied. "I've found the Cekorax. A mage and I, a *good* mage, are thinking of a way to kill it." I stood up and brushed off my cloak. "It'll be dead before you know it. By the way, stay away from the gardens."

"Oh. All right."

It was those flat little words that stopped me. I looked at Mizzy and saw her lip tremble, and realized she knew I'd lied but was pretending. That her friends killed by a monster were worth avenging. That someone in this grinding city would help. That a funny stranger in fancy dress would turn out to be, if not a hero, a decent imitation of one.

All the while the crackling clouds in the bottle kept turning. My breath caught and something broke open in my head. A reckless, perilous plan, but one I knew I had to chance if I ever wanted to call myself a Lord of Fortune in good standing.

"Mizzy?" I asked. "How would you like to make a hundred aurum?"

The girl gaped. Then her eyes brightened. Imagination had won. "For what, mister?" She looked at the dress. "Missus?"

"It's missus when I'm in this outfit. Anyhow: We'll need mages. And a trip to your alchemist. And—" My fingers twitched, as they do when I'm on a sudden upswing. "Best do this at night, Mizzy."

***

Dorian's patronage or not, I felt it best to be cautious after the debacle with the templars and the map case. Besides, what I was planning needed a certain amount of discretion. People would have questions after we put my plan into motion—never mind that if it worked, they should thank me! I've learned not to overestimate gratitude with these things.

So people saw a human magister sweep into an alchemist's shop. After deep consultation with the doddering woman, she purchased a variety of eye-wateringly dangerous powders. A cloaked dwarf, newly emerged from the underground and complaining about the sun, purchased a quanari-style harpoon from a purveyor of slightly reclaimed weaponry. It was a smudgy elf child who ran through the public gardens, pretending to clean refuse while clandestinely placing sacks underneath benches and a package in the crook of a fountain. She was later met by a hunched quanari slave, hobbling with her into the press of the streets.

Then, after I wiped the makeup from Mizzy's squirming face, and changed into the clothes I'd worn when I first met him, we visited Dorian Pavus. He let us in with a raised eyebrow, and was very good about not throwing me out when I told him my plan.

* * *

It was dark when the lovers, spies, poets, thieves, and magisters still occupying the public gardens were driven out by a sudden wave of throat-scouring fumes. The stuff was so powerful my eyes streamed as Mizzy and I sat on a pair of aqueducts below the reservoir. From that vantage, you saw the thing was shaped like an onion bulb on stilts. Dragons frolicked above.

"I think everyone's gone," said Mizzy.

There was still a little makeup on her chin. The Cekorax wouldn't know *her*, but Mizzy had insisted on going out in disguise anyway when she tossed those satchels about. The bags slowly baked in the sun, letting off their vapors when the night came and they cooled again. The alchemist had tried to explain it to me. I had told her it should be adequate for "driving rats off my property."

"It's time." I gave Mizzy a gentle shove. "Get up to where Dorian and his friend are. I'll give you a signal when I'm ready."

"What's that?"

"Waving, possibly some yelling."

She nodded. "I like your clothes." I was wearing the colorful sashes, capes, pants, shirt, belts, scarves, charms, and gold jewelry that are the right and privilege of any Lord of Fortune that lasts a year or two. Yes, like I'm wearing now. Noise wouldn't be a problem that night. I gave Mizzy a bangle, and her eyes went wide.

"I'll keep it always, even if you end up dying," she told me. Then with that slice of cheer, she ran off into the dark.

I tied a wet scarf tight around my lower face. This would be the worst part. I saw glowing leaves shiver as I strolled, conspicuously, right through the gardens.

The scarf helped with the fumes. Nothing else stopped me. As I walked, coughing a little, I saw coils slip out of sight, and heard a noise light as a sigh in the blossoms and the trellises and the trees.

"Visitor. Oh, visitor. Come to me."

It could draw you, that voice. It was too easy to slide to the center of that green maze, down the terraces to where the water in a fountain rippled with the breeze.

"Hello again," I choked out. "How've you been?"

That tittering again. High and away, I saw two small dots of blue glow from a ledge on the tower beside the reservoir. Two vials of lyrium. Mages drink the stuff, sparingly, when they're about to undertake great works.

"Cekorax." I coughed again, and projected my best pleading and yearning, a hopelessness that "not enough" is all life would ever be. "Here I am. I give up. You can have me. If! I beg a favor, just one thing. I've only seen part of you. Your whole, great Cekorax. Before I die, that's what I want to see."

The fountain gurgled, and eyes sprang out from the bushes and under the water, strands of ropes brazenly coiling up the trees.

"Yes," that awful voice fluted to me.

Its flesh poured into the lawns around the fountain, churning balls of worms connecting and re-forming. One teasingly sliced off one of my dangling scarves, held it in front of a curious eye, as more and more of the monster drew itself out of the gardens in front of me. I backed away, climbing onto the stone lip of the fountain. A four-headed stone dragon spewed water into the basin.

"Look," the Cekorax said, as a mass as tall as a house undulated up. It peeled open at the top, like a lily, and tilted forward so I could see.

There was a ring of heads. Dozens, not just nine. Their eyes were plucked out, their flesh otherwise whole and healthy. Squeezing tendrils ran inside, caressed the cheeks. A crown of the blind, lovingly carried inside that atrocity. When the Cekorax spoke, their silent mouths formed the dripping words.

"Come inside and see."

I must have screamed and waved my arms, because a ball of fire and stone cast from a pair of staffs smashed into the looming reservoir with incredible ferocity. It had never been built to withstand an assault. Especially when packets of explosive Quanari gaatlok powder had been stuck there by some idiot earlier. There was a *crack* from the reservoir, then the terrible sensation of stone buckling and a great weight sliding free.

Even the Cekorax stopped writhing, turning its tendrils before a lake's worth of water swept over everything.

I grabbed the fountain's dragons. The deluge ripped off my scarves, the charms and necklaces. When the roaring became a stream and then a trickle, I threw up a lungful of water. Arms aching, I dragged my numb legs behind me as I climbed up the dragon heads.

The bulk, that crown, rose untroubled, whipping its many limbs about as if it were shaking off a light rain. Other ropy strands slid through the water like eels circling the fountain. My hands groped back, into the small pit where the dragon heads met.

"Come," it said, as if we hadn't been interrupted. *"See how nothing can hurt me. Come and be safe. Your true face forever. Be free."*

I relaxed, nodding as those scalpel blades hummed. My hand closed on the harpoon that Mizzy had hidden earlier, and threw. It punctured the Cekorax's main mass with a *squelch*. A whirring blade sliced off one of the dragon heads. A metal coil I had looped around the harpoon was now dangling in the water nicely. I ducked another blade, and screamed up to the mages: "NOW, PLEASE!"

Lightning slammed into the upturned harpoon. The Cekorax shrieked. Everything in the water lit up, purple spots dancing in my eyes as it grew almost too bright to see. Flesh spasmed, every connected root and frond twisting. The Cekorax's main mass toppled and *popped*. Blue-white liquid poured into the water, dissolved.

"Visitor," it gurgled, voices lost as heads toppled from the crown. The last one was barely a whisper. *"What have you done to me?"*

I waited until the thrashing stopped, and all the worming ropes grew very still. The water continued to spark and sizzle, and I knew better than to leave. But I wanted to mark the victory.

"I was told to tell you, O Cekorax, that that was from Mizzy."

* * *

"That was one of the most disgusting things I've ever seen in my life," Dorian said as we arrived at the bristling piles of the docks. We were in a carriage, drawn by those horse-size lizards Tevinter likes so much. Even their draft animals are an oddity.

"Do you know what Mae and I found left of the Cekorax in that soup after it drained away?" Dorian continued. "A sort of *skin*, mostly."

"Like a sausage casing," I said helpfully.

"Please don't."

"I must ask: What *was* the Cekorax?"

Dorian smoothed down one side of his mustache. "That soggy mess didn't do much to clear that up. Some ancient breed of demon? Some fiend brewed up by a magister?" He looked pensive. "I was at a party with one of those necromancers from down south a while ago. Five cups in, she went on about things 'past the Veil of our world,' neither demon nor spirit. Perhaps it wasn't the tipsy nonsense I assumed it to be."

The lizards pulled the carriage over a high-arching bridge. For once, at least in this thoroughfare, it was quiet in the city. Dorian stuck his head out for a moment to admire the sight, then drew back in.

"Maevaris sends her regards, by the way. I doubt that light show would have been so splendid without her help. She'd be here, but intrigue struck in the Magisterium."

"Will she have to explain to them how the garden reservoir cracked open so mysteriously?"

"I understand those dastardly perpetrators are long gone from the city. We're going to have a harder time explaining the lightning. It's been a while since I cast something so spectacular, and it practically lit up every corner in Minrathous."

I hefted my purse. Five hundred aurum. No, Mizzy didn't ask for more. But after a night like that, I felt she'd acted so much like a Lord of

Fortune in the making, anything less than half was miserly. She and her sister were leaving the city for a while, until those troublesome questions about who'd flooded whose public gardens faded from memory. If she liked, I had told Mizzy, she might learn something from the Lords of Fortune in Rivain.

"I've got loads of aunts and uncles and cousins south of here," she had said reproachfully. "I've got to take care of them now that I'm a rich lady. But when I grow up," she'd concluded, "maybe I'll visit. Don't forget me!" Then she hugged me for a moment, and ran into the crowds and was gone.

The carriage pulled up to a clipper. The sails were pearl-white, and its captain was already waiting. "Courtesy of Maevaris. I'll thank her for you. It's fast, and reasonably comfortable even by my standards," Dorian said. "Everything's paid up for your journey."

"You two are exceedingly generous." I replied, and meant it very much.

"Consider it one last courtesy. Mae and I would hate to leave you with a bad impression of this fair city."

I got out and took my packs, and looked at the clustered towers of Minrathous in the sunrise. For a moment and from that angle, it was serenity. Turning to Dorian, I told him, "I wouldn't come back to Minrathous even if you paid me." Then I shrugged. "But a few of the people are very lovely."

He laughed, and waved goodbye as I set out on the boat to Rivain. I've since drilled a hole into one of those five hundred golden coins, and have it around my neck, here, just for the memories.

Anyhow, to answer your earlier question: That's the story of how I came by this map case, with sapphires of such fine quality.

HUNGER

BRIANNE BATTYE

One here, one there.

The trader who failed to turn up that summer. The cooper gone missing by the river. They thought "accident" despite knowing better. They thought "bad luck," which was closer.

A month went by. Enough to let them justify. To feel safe.

The trader's father passed through that autumn, in search of his missing son. A hunter went out and never returned. Another hunter clawed apart, left strewn across the path for them to find.

Were they "accidents" now?

Then came the sounds at night. The blood in the barn the next morning.

The sounds came again two weeks later, followed by screams. Then again, the following week.

When they sounded again, she ran.

Are you hungry? it asked itself.

She ran.

And it followed.

* * *

The horses had already bolted.

Five darkspawn blocked the road ahead—three hurlocks with rust-spotted armor and chipped blades, and a pair of genlocks, their blight-mottled limbs exposed and thick with muscle. The lead hurlock snarled, lips peeling up from gray teeth. It took a halting step toward the two Grey Wardens, teasing them.

Antoine held his bow loosely in one hand. This was it. His other hand hung by his side, fingers twitching. Ready.

The last and only time he'd fought darkspawn, it hadn't gone well. He'd barely survived and lay near death for days before the Grey Wardens rescued him.

He hadn't been a Grey Warden then, but he was now. And Grey Wardens stopped the monsters first.

"We're outnumbered." Evka's dark eyes flicked to the left, her heightened senses alerting her to further danger. "And surrounded."

They didn't tell outsiders that part—that being a Grey Warden meant a ritual that connected you to the darkspawn. That the strange song that runs through their heads will run through yours, too. Antoine's own senses hummed, but he wasn't used to reading them. Instead he was getting a mild headache. "That's bad, no?"

"Only if we die," Evka said. She released a knife from her belt, turned, and threw it at the darkspawn shriek that burst through the trees to their left. The shriek let out a sharp cry as the blade cut its arm. It raked a taloned hand at the dwarf, but Evka had already dived clear. She drew a short ax and squared off against the monster.

The darkspawn on the road ahead charged at Antoine. He tensed but didn't move. Five darkspawn, narrow path, they were crowded together . . .

"Avoiding death means doing something," Evka called.

"Almost, almost," Antoine muttered.

"Now." Evka dodged another blow.

Antoine reached into his pocket, pulled out a round glass vial, and threw it at the nearest hurlock.

The vial bounced off the darkspawn's chest and onto the ground.

The hurlock blinked.

Not exactly the plan, but there was always a backup . . . once Antoine figured out what that was.

"Antoine!" Evka shouted. The shriek screamed again, the sound almost enough to make their ears bleed.

"*Désolé*—sorry! That's not what it's supposed to do!" Antoine sprang backward, nocking an arrow as he went, and fired. The shot went clean through the hurlock's eye, bringing the darkspawn down and ensuring the elf's head remained on his shoulders.

Evka ripped her ax from the shriek's chest, turned, and slid herself between Antoine and one of the genlocks. Blood spattered across her face as her ax tore through thick flesh. Antoine nocked another arrow and fired over Evka's head into the monster's face.

Two hurlocks and one genlock left. Their odds were slightly better.

Or they were before the remaining genlock flung out its arm, sending Antoine into a nearby tree.

Dazed, Antoine heard Evka call his name again. She must have dealt with the genlock because only the hurlocks advanced on his fellow Warden. As he picked himself up, his eyes landed on the glass container lying in the dust by Evka's feet.

There it was: a backup plan.

Antoine darted forward, a rock in hand. He barely registered Evka's startled expression before flinging himself to the ground, bringing the rock down on the vial.

There was a sharp *crack* and a dark cloud billowed up and outward, obscuring everything in its wake.

"What—?"

"That's what it's supposed to do!" Antoine cheered.

"Have you ever heard of a warning?" Evka griped, but she'd already taken advantage of the disoriented hurlocks, bringing down the one closest to her.

Antoine rolled back to his feet, drew his bow, and fired at the final darkspawn. Black, sluggish blood spat from its teeth. It staggered and fell.

As the cloud began to clear, Antoine broke the silence with his own relieved laughter.

"Weisshaupt's not a short walk," Evka noted.

Antoine brushed off his coat, unconcerned. They'd fought six darkspawn—and he was still on his feet. It was much better than almost dying.

"Another detour," he said. Evka rolled her eyes.

"There must be an inn nearby," Antoine said.

The sound of thunder grumbled overhead.

***

Warden Evka Ivo had grown up in Orzammar. The dwarven city was what it was: stone floors, stone walls, stone ceilings. It never changed much. Her three years with the Grey Wardens had brought her to the surface and she'd found a lot to love about life aboveground.

Being outside in the rain wasn't included.

Being outside in the rain after dark was even worse.

"Is it sore?" Antoine asked, catching Evka rubbing her shoulder.

Evka glanced up at the elf. Knowing him, he'd found some guaranteed-to-work ointment at a roadside stand. "Nothing sleep won't fix. If we get any. Then we'll push on."

"Are we late?"

"Not yet," Evka said. "But we had horses this morning."

Warden life was hardly predictable. She knew that. But nothing about Antoine's short time with the Wardens had been a straight line. After a hasty recruitment in Orlais, Evka was charged with taking the new recruit to a quiet outpost. They weren't halfway there when the messenger caught them. The summons called available Wardens to Weisshaupt Fortress, the center of their order, located in the heart of the Anderfels. Evka and Antoine had crossed the vague border a few days ago, the landscape already taking on the bleak cliffs and ragged forests of the harsh northern country.

"The vials need improvement," Antoine admitted. "But when it worked it was interesting, no?"

"It was," Evka conceded. Antoine grinned. "And you could have died," she added.

"You've said that to me before," Antoine said, teasing as always.

Evka winced.

She'd been the one to find Antoine. He should have been dead. According to the other servants, they'd only escaped darkspawn because "that grinning lunatic distracted them." When the Wardens arrived, Antoine was three-quarters gone and muttering to himself. Poisoned with darkspawn blood, his only hope was to take the Joining ritual and become a Grey Warden—if he could survive it. Turns out he could and he'd been cheerful as a songbird ever since. Not the reaction she'd expected.

Antoine gave her a sideways look and changed the subject. “We saved the horses.”

“They ran away,” Evka said.

“From darkspawn. Which we defeated.”

“That doesn’t—”

Evka’s retort was cut short by a young woman crashing through the trees and onto the road in front of them. Her forearms were bare, thin dark lines showing where she’d run through branches, and sharp burrs clung to her skirt. At the sight of the Wardens, the woman spun away, slipped, and fell to the ground.

“It’s all right,” Antoine said immediately. The woman clawed dark tangles of rain-plastered hair from her face and scrambled to her feet. Her eyes darted to the surrounding trees. Antoine took a step toward her. “We can help you.”

The woman gave a bitter laugh. “No, you won’t,” she said.

“What’s after you?” Evka asked. She nodded to Antoine, who readied his bow and scanned the surrounding woods. Given the late hour, overcast sky, and dense trees, it was impossible to see far.

The woman’s eyes fixed on the griffon insignia on Evka’s chest. “You’re Wardens.”

“Wardens Antoine and Evka,” Antoine said happily. Evka was surprised he didn’t pair the announcement with a jaunty bow. “And you are?”

“Mina Bauer.” The woman took a step closer. “It’s still out there.”

“What is?” Antoine asked.

“We don’t know,” Mina said. “People go missing. We find nothing or . . . it’s not human. We know that.”

“Could be darkspawn,” Evka said, more to Antoine than Mina. She couldn’t sense any nearby, but that didn’t mean they weren’t farther into the woods.

“Darkspawn,” Mina said, turning the idea over. Her eyes lit up. “Wardens have to fight darkspawn. You’re sworn to it. You’ll go to Eichweill.” It was almost an order, save for the anxious way she wrapped her arms around herself.

“This place you’re from . . .” Evka said.

“Eichweill,” Mina said.

“Does it have a place we can get out of the rain?”

“Yes.”

"Then it's worth stopping by," Evka said. She expected Antoine to chime in, but instead he was standing still—too still—staring intently into the dark woods, his expression troubled. "Antoine?"

He shook his head and that easy smile returned. "Likely nothing. Another detour?"

Evka nodded then turned to Mina. "Lead on."

***

It was nearly midnight when the path opened slightly and revealed their first view of Eichweill. The rain had passed and in the thin moonlight the village was small and colorless. What passed for the main road was little more than a lopsided mud track lined with gray stone buildings. A large wooden statue met them at the village entrance but whether it was a man, a bear, or Holy Andraste herself was hard to say, the features weathered to nothing. The entire place looked run-down but steadily maintained, on the verge of collapse yet oddly permanent.

And the Wardens were here to save it.

At least two of them were.

To their left, a squat, two-story building crouched next to the road. Hazy yellow light strained to extend from undersize windows. A worn sign showed only an angry round toad, the establishment's name long peeled away. Mina walked straight to the entrance and banged on the heavy wood door. It swung open a crack—enough for a pale eye to appraise the people on the front step—then far enough for them to see a thin man with hunched shoulders and wisps of gray hair. Behind the man, a handful of drawn and tired villagers eyed the Wardens with wary distrust.

"Back, are ya? Figured you dead," the man said. Mina looked ready to retort, but the man moved on. "Who're these, then?"

"Grey Wardens," Mina said. "They're here to help."

The man scratched at an itch behind his ear.

"Wardens swear oaths," Mina said. Someone inside the inn snorted.

Antoine stood a little straighter. This wasn't the welcome he'd expected. "You're the innkeeper?" he tried politely.

"When there's call for it. Rest of the time I'm the tailor. Verschel." The man held out a hand, curled slightly with age, and Antoine shook it. Verschel nodded, grabbed a lantern from inside the door, and stepped

past them out of the inn. Evka shrugged and the Wardens fell in line behind him.

"If you're here darkspawn's as good a guess as any," Verschel said. "Had those in my father's time."

They followed Verschel up the muddy road, passing a few homes, a trade shop, and the blackened remains of a building that had caught fire and never been rebuilt. The small group from the inn followed, picking up a few more villagers along the way despite the late hour.

"Attacks started this summer," Verschel continued, as if updating the Wardens on the year's crop status. "Come every week now. Sometimes two or three times. Wager it will be more than that soon enough."

The road abruptly opened into a small market square with a well at its center. They turned before reaching the large house that loomed at the end of it, its windows and doors boarded over. The track they followed was narrower and darker than the one they'd left. It stopped at a small house, gray like all the others. Verschel led them around the back and gestured vaguely to a crooked shed.

"There's tonight's," he said.

The door to the shed had burst inward. Splinters littered the floor. Woodcarving tools were scattered about, knocked and kicked from the stand that had held them. A swerving trail of dark brown led away from the pool of dried blood on the dusty floor. The trail disappeared when it left the shed, washed away by the rain.

Mina watched the Wardens closely; she was shaking now, her arms wrapped around herself. The rest of the crowd hung back, trampling the remains of a garden.

Evka went to work immediately. She knelt among the wreckage, observing the blood trail closely.

"Who?" she asked simply.

"My brother," Mina said. "Willem." Her level tone failed to cover the crack in her voice.

"Mes condoléances," Antoine murmured.

"Go on," Verschel said. "You brought your help. That's enough." Mina didn't move, but tears threatened the corners of her eyes. The crowd stared.

"The attacks," Antoine said loudly, drawing attention to himself. "What brought them on?"

"It's this damned place," said a man with thick arms and tangled hair. "Bad luck all over."

An elderly woman in a nightgown and overlarge boots bobbed in agreement. "Boy won't be the last—"

"We don't know he's dead!" Mina cut in.

"You didn't run for *them*." The elderly woman waved vaguely at Evka. "You *ran*. You knew."

Mina paced away from the crowd, her fists clenched, then turned to Antoine. Her breath was coming faster now. "There's not always a body. Darkspawn take people, don't they? Sometimes?"

Antoine wasn't sure. He hadn't died, but that was luck. They hadn't taken him either.

"What chance does someone taken by darkspawn have?" the man said. "None."

"If there's a way—" Mina began.

"False hope's no good either," Verschel added.

Antoine could answer that.

"We don't know it's false yet," he said. He glanced back at Evka. They *didn't* know, did they?

Evka stood, brushing the dust from her hands. "It's not darkspawn."

"What?" Mina spluttered. "It has to . . . you can't . . ."

Antoine separated himself from the crowd and came to stand next to Evka. "But we saw them earlier today," he murmured. Ride in, save the village from darkspawn—that was the plan, wasn't it? That's how being a Warden worked.

"The blood's right there. What do you sense?" Evka asked quietly, then added: "And try not to block it out this time."

Antoine flushed. It wasn't that he tried to block it out, he just didn't . . . He pushed the complaints from his mind and tried to focus. The crowd shifted behind him, out of view but distracting.

"These people are scared." He took a deep breath. The air was still heavy and damp. "It's going to rain again."

"And?" Evka prompted.

Antoine closed his eyes and listened for the sick song that pulled at the corners of his mind and gave him a headache whenever darkspawn were nearby. The song made him feel on edge. When he got too close, it was loud and it made him think of things he didn't want to . . . But he felt fine. There was nothing there.

"It's not darkspawn," he said.

Mina's defiance broke through the Warden-lesson. "You're wrong."

"Darkspawn don't take a single person at a time. Not like this," Evka said. "Your brother fought. There's blood on that ax—and it's not the right blood. It wasn't them."

The crowd erupted into a chorus of resignation and distrust:

"So you'll leave?"

"The Wardens' promise only goes for darkspawn, doesn't it?"

"Why come here, then?"

Antoine held up his hands, hoping the crowd would quiet. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. But it was fine. The plan had shifted, but he could adjust.

"Something is after you. We know that much. We won't leave you at its mercy." They wouldn't, right? He glanced back at Evka, and she gave him a slight nod. "Let us try. There's no harm in that."

The crowd continued to grumble, but gave up the argument and wandered home, leaving the Wardens alone with Mina. "Why does no one think we'll help?" Antoine asked.

"Because Eichweill's cursed," Mina said. "That's what people say. And we're either too far out or too Maker-damned for folks to bother with our bad luck. Or they show up and die, too."

"We didn't come here to abandon you," Antoine said. "That's not what Wardens do."

"Then prove it," Mina snapped. She took a deep breath, then gave the Wardens the first and only hopeful look they'd received. "Please," she said, then turned and went inside the house.

"That's not what Wardens do?" Evka asked with a smirk.

"It's not what I would do," Antoine said. So there were no darkspawn to stop. There was still a village to save—that was something. He could work with that.

"Yeah, me neither," Evka said.

"Any idea what did this?"

"None."

"But we can handle it?"

Evka's smile was dangerous. "That's the idea."

When they got back to the inn, Verschel had rooms ready for them. Antoine's was comfortable, if drafty. He had the feeling everything was drafty here. When he closed his eyes, he dreamed the dream he always

did. When he opened them, it was still dark. A tree branch beat arrhythmic patterns on the window and there was a strange, hollow moaning that Antoine wasn't entirely sure was the wind.

***

"What happened there?" Evka asked as the Wardens followed Verschel and Mina through the village the next day. If Eichweill was colorless at night, daylight did it few favors. If anything, the streets and buildings were somehow grayer.

Verschel barely gave the burned-out building a glance. "Rogue mages—apostates—five years back now? Made some stand against those chasing 'em. Raised a bunch of demons. Or became 'em. Not sure which."

"What about that house?" Antoine asked when they reached the market square, suppressing a yawn and gesturing toward the boarded-up building they'd passed the night before.

"Renke's place," Mina said.

"Belonged to a couple nobles down on funds," Verschel explained. "Old ones were fine. But the son—he thought he was owed something. Poisoned our only Chantry brother when the man caught him thieving. We ran him out last winter."

"So when you said your village was cursed . . ." Evka said. In addition to the apostates and murderous nobles' son, they'd learned about the blacksmith's possessed donkey, seen the site of a freak lightning strike, and heard about the bandit gang that attempted to hold Eichweill hostage—until they realized no one cared.

"If you're looking for reason in the attacks, there's no sense in it," Verschel said. "It's always one thing or another. Just the way it is."

"Right," Evka said.

Mina had offered to show the Wardens the other attack sites, prompting Verschel to follow since no one else got the order right. There were dark circles under Mina's eyes, and she hadn't said much, but she watched the Wardens closely, waiting for them to find answers at every stop. It wasn't going to happen. Each site revealed signs of a powerful *something* entering Eichweill, but little else. The other villagers answered questions, but otherwise took no interest, accepting the Wardens' failure as inevitable.

"There's no point in you two dying here," said a cherry-faced woman, barely sparing them a glance from the candles she was making. "You do that and who's left with the mess when your next of kin come looking, huh?"

"Wardens don't have next of kin," Evka said. "At least none that come looking."

"There's still a mess," huffed the candlemaker and waited for the Wardens to leave.

"There's still the woods," Antoine said after they'd examined a goat shed with indistinct scratch marks on the walls.

Evka stared out at the thick ring of trees that encircled the village. "That's a lot of ground and no place to start."

"We lost a hunter in there a month back," Mina offered. "We don't know where exactly, but the trail should've taken him past the split rock."

"Then we track the creature where it lives and stop it before it returns!" Antoine said, as if that ending were inevitable, enthusiasm making his mouth run faster than his brain.

"You do that," Verschel said.

Not long after, Evka and Antoine were far enough into the trees that gray Eichweill was hidden from view. A crow screamed from the rattling branches of a nearby tree.

"That's cheerful," Evka said, watching the crow take off into the overcast sky.

"What's a cursed village without atmosphere?" Antoine teased. He was enjoying himself, but then, he enjoyed everything. Despite leaving Eichweill almost immediately, he'd managed to buy a half-dozen sweet rolls, which he didn't seem interested in eating, and a series of silver cylinders that were supposed to give off sparks when properly lit. The latter had reportedly come from a Qunari trader. Evka suspected he'd been swindled. At least he shared the rolls.

"There it is!" Antoine said as they broke through a stand of trees. Up ahead a large, split boulder sat in a small clearing. "Where do we start?"

"By looking," Evka said.

"For what?"

"Anything."

"We know it's not darkspawn," he said, starting to explore the clearing.

"There's that," Evka said. The ground was still wet from the previous night's rain; damp leaves clung to each other in giant clumps.

"You're disappointed?"

"Darkspawn, we could sense—whether you want to or not," she added, catching the look on Antoine's face. She continued her search. Darkspawn would be easy. Darkspawn she could handle. She could even keep Antoine alive while doing so. Probably.

"The rain's washed everything away," Antoine called.

"Not everything," Evka said.

A graying, waterlogged arm lay in the leaves, its fingers curved and contorted upward like a dead spider. Punctures and tears in the flesh implied the work of teeth—and large ones. There was no sign of the rest of the body. Antoine drew a quick breath as he came up beside her.

Whatever had attacked Eichweill was no less daunting than a darkspawn. Not knowing what it was made it worse.

Evka signaled Antoine to ready his bow, then led them away from the arm, down a nearby animal track. Evka was a skilled tracker underground and her aboveground skills weren't bad. Enough to give her something to go on. Moving half on actual clues, half on hunch, she led them farther into the trees. The forest was as silent as they were. No more crows, no periodic rustle of small rodents.

Then there was the buzz of flies.

The Wardens exchanged a look and kept moving.

And the buzzing grew louder.

A dark mound rose on the path up ahead. The last of the autumn insects flew drunkenly over it, swarming over the raw flesh.

"Just a ram," Evka breathed, relieved but not enough to speak at full volume. The relief faded with a glance at Antoine. "What is it?"

Antoine's eyes were darting around the scene, the way they did when he was thinking a lot of things at once. He moved carefully toward the dead ram, his hand tracing the path of twisting entrails in the air.

"It's not been eaten," he said.

He was right. Evka felt a chill despite herself. "An animal would have eaten this."

"A lure?" Antoine asked.

"A call." The voice came from the trees, cold and scraping like an ax over stone. Evka had her own ax ready before it could finish the words. Antoine whipped his bow in the direction of the sound.

"Then we're called," Evka said, keeping her voice cold. If it wanted to scare them, she wouldn't give it that edge.

"Not for you. Not yet. For my own." The voice was behind them now. Antoine spun around. Evka moved to stand with her back to his.

But nothing emerged from the woods around them. The wind began to pick up and with it a strange hollow moaning. She felt Antoine take a step away from her. He looked pale and his face held a look of troubled concentration. The way it did when he was trying to shut out darkspawn, but that's not what this was. Still, he kept his bow on the trees. Then the moaning stopped.

"It's gone," Antoine said, unusually subdued.

"Antoine?"

A slow roll of thunder sounded overhead. The crow from before—or perhaps a different one—let out a scream. Antoine looked at Evka and smiled brightly, as if nothing had happened. "Shall we beat the rain to Verschel's?"

"Sure," she said. She watched the elf carefully on the way back, but he seemed fine.

***

In Antoine's dream he was dying. Darkspawn had attacked and their blood was poisoning him. It burned and he couldn't think straight. Sometimes it felt like nothing and that was just as bad. The plan was to lie there. The backup plan was to die. Then a dwarf was asking him a question . . .

Antoine woke with a start.

There was a dwarf watching him with an amused expression on her face. "Ready?"

He'd fallen asleep sitting up in the inn's small dining room. His untouched supper sat cold in front of him. He ran a hand over his face to wake himself up and grinned at Evka. *"On y va!"*

The butchered ram and strange voice in the woods were enough of a bad sign that they'd decided to patrol the village that night. They didn't know what they were patrolling *for*, but it felt suitably heroic. It was closer to how Antoine imagined Warden life than anything else that had happened. They'd managed to convince Verschel and a few others to

help. The agreements were grudging, but since two Wardens couldn't cover the entire village by themselves, it was better than nothing.

"Do we know anything?" Antoine asked as they went to check the path to Mina's house for the third time.

"Only that trouble that talks back is the worst kind." Evka shrugged, then gave him a probing look that made his chest tighten. There'd been something strange about the voice in the woods, but he couldn't explain it. He'd just tried to block it out.

"Should we—" Antoine froze.

That sound was on the wind again. The same one he'd heard on the road where they'd met Mina, in the inn last night, and in the woods that afternoon. The sound the villagers must have been hearing for weeks. Reedy, hollow moaning. It made him feel sick and defiant. He wanted it to go away. Then a new sound joined the first. High-pitched, terrified—and human. The sound jarred Antoine back to his senses. He took off for the market square with Evka at his heels.

Despite their fear, a ring of villagers surrounded the well that stood in front of the boarded-up Renke house. As Antoine squeezed through the crowd, he caught sight of the blacksmith's thick arms and tangled hair—of his blank eyes and the thread of intestines looping away from his torn middle. The man had been one of their volunteers.

This wasn't how it was supposed to go.

"You!" spat a voice from the crowd. "What good are you?"

"I don't—" Antoine couldn't see who'd spoken, and then it was everyone.

"They can't stop this."

"It's always the same."

"They let him die."

"What difference does it make?"

"We didn't—" Antoine tried.

"Is it still here?" someone asked.

The hollow moaning that swelled from all around gave them an answer. The crowd started to panic. Antoine was finding it hard to focus. This wasn't how it was supposed to go.

"Everyone, you need to—" Evka began.

A throat-wrenching scream cut the words short as a man was dragged down from the edge of the square. In seconds, he was yanked from the lantern lights of the other villagers and into the darkness.

Then the screaming stopped.

The crowd erupted into screams of their own.

"Antoine—there!" Through the press of people running, he saw Evka moving toward the shadow that had started this. Antoine swallowed and ran after her. No matter what the strange voice was, or the hollow moaning, Wardens didn't run away. If he did, these people, Evka . . .

Antoine ran faster.

The shadow—the creature—barreled away from the square and the shouting villagers. Whatever this thing was, it was fast. And big. Very big. It ran on all fours, its gait overly stretched, uncanny but efficient. They couldn't let it get away.

But it was getting away.

The creature veered down the uneven path that led to the now-ownerless smithy. Antoine realized Evka was no longer with him, but he couldn't stop now. If the beast cleared the smithy it would be in the trees. It would escape.

He wasn't going to catch it in a straight chase. He needed a plan . . .

His only hope was to make it around the smithy first. He darted from the path, cutting what he hoped was a faster trail and praying the beast wouldn't change course. He made it in time, but barely. The beast charged in from the left.

And then again from the right with Evka chasing after it.

A call. But not for them . . . *for my own* . . .

There was more than one.

Antoine released an arrow, but he was too slow. The beasts veered off and bolted for the woods. The Wardens raced after them.

Antoine reached the treeline first. It was still, silent. Where had they gone? He needed a plan, any plan . . .

But there wasn't time.

With a snarl, one of the creatures leapt from the shadows at Evka. She dodged just in time, cursing as she did. Antoine fired a shot and there was the sound of an arrow driving through flesh. The beast let out a cry, twisted mid-leap, and raced back into the trees. Antoine plunged in after it.

Injured now, the beast didn't run as quietly. Antoine could hear it crashing through the underbrush. The beast was still fast, but Antoine was gaining on it. He leaped over a gnarled root, ignoring the branch

that struck him across the face. Up ahead, the beast had paused and was pacing back and forth. Antoine readied his bow and fired.

Before the arrow reached its mark, the beast vanished.

Antoine blinked. That couldn't be right. It was just . . . *gone*.

***

When Evka caught up to Antoine, the elf had his bow lowered, uncertain. There was a line of blood on his face, but he didn't seem to notice.

"What happened?" Evka asked.

"It . . . disappeared," Antoine said. "It can disappear."

Evka turned in a slow circle. *Disappeared . . . to where?*

"We need light," Antoine murmured.

"That will show them where we are," she said. If they didn't know already. Had the beasts fled—or were they watching?

"It was up here," Antoine said, moving ahead to show her the way.

Evka caught Antoine by the arm before he vanished himself.

The leaves were scrambled here, clawed. What little light there was showed dark drops of blood on the forest floor—all leading to a deep fissure that opened in the ground in front of them. It would have been difficult to see during the day. It was almost invisible in the dark.

"That's how your beast disappeared," Evka said.

"Or it *did* vanish and the fissure's a ruse," Antoine teased even now.

"I'll go first."

"In the dark?" Not so teasing anymore.

Evka lowered herself down first and they climbed carefully into the fissure. To Antoine's credit, he managed not to fall.

It was even harder to see at the bottom, but Evka could make out claw marks in the soft earth. Not that it mattered—with sheer rock walls rising on either side, there was only one direction they could go. The Wardens remained silent as they moved down the shadowy chasm. A brighter shade of moonlight up ahead signaled they were about to move back into the open.

They didn't move very far.

With a reedy howl, four beasts emerged from the trees in front of them. They walked upright but it didn't look comfortable: their limbs were overlong, their movements jerky and awkward.

But when they ran, they dropped to all fours.

Dark, patchy fur rose in spiky hackles on their necks. They snarled as they charged, muzzles full of sharp teeth, yellow eyes lit with malice.

"Shit!" Evka swung at their attackers. She hadn't sensed them up ahead. This was why darkspawn were easier.

"Les loups-garous!" Antoine cried as he dodged clear.

"What?" Evka struck at a silver-furred monster, but it leaped away.

"Werewolves!" Antoine said.

The creatures were circling now, keeping the Wardens penned in.

Evka kept her eyes on the silver beast. "Not something we had underground. Did you have these in Orlais?"

"No. Maybe. I don't know," Antoine said. "They were just in stories."

The werewolves continued to circle, waiting to catch their prey off guard.

"What do you know?" Evka said.

"Did I mention they were stories?"

"Do you have a better plan?"

"Right!" Antoine said. "It's a curse—"

A large black werewolf broke from the ring and lunged at Evka. She blocked the snapping jaws with the handle of her ax.

"Don't let them bite," Antoine said. "It's how the curse spreads!"

Evka had no intention of letting that happen. She twisted the ax handle upward, wrenching the werewolf's jaw sideways, and kicked the beast away.

Antoine fired an arrow at the creature's feet—massive paws with long fingers and claws—and it danced back. As the black werewolf retreated, the silver beast charged again, followed by another with roan fur.

Evka swung around and caught the silver beast in the shoulder, sending it back out of reach. Antoine dodged and fired at his own attacker, again the shot landing near its feet, causing the beast to jump away.

"These—they were human," Antoine called.

She could hear the regret in his voice. "They're still trying to kill us!"

"I know!"

Taking advantage of her distraction, the black werewolf came at Evka from behind. She wasn't going to turn in time. She saw its frenzied eyes, its sharp teeth.

It fell dead at her feet, an arrow between its eyes.

Evka and Antoine stood back-to-back as the remaining werewolves circled once more.

"On your left!" Evka shouted as the silver beast took the lead, charging toward the Wardens at full speed.

Antoine spun so he was facing the werewolf. His shot caught the beast in the ribs as Evka darted forward. Her ax was in its throat before it could make another move. As she pulled her weapon from the now-silent creature, Antoine turned and took down the roan wolf with a volley of arrows.

Just one left.

The remaining werewolf rose on its hind legs and took a lurching step toward Antoine. It was a clean shot, but Antoine just stared, as if stunned by the unnerving change in its posture. Evka readied her ax and raced to meet it.

"Wait!" Antoine yelled, throwing himself between the dwarf and the werewolf.

"What are you—"

"This one never charged."

"That doesn't—"

The werewolf fell back to its knees and whimpered. "Help." The word came out like a choke. As if formed by cords not meant for speech.

Evka swore.

Antoine was walking slowly toward the werewolf, weapon lowered, that friendly smile on his face though his eyes were at least wary.

"What's your name?" Antoine asked, his voice light. As if talking to a child.

"Willem." The werewolf coughed. It sounded almost sulky.

"Mina's brother," Evka breathed.

Antoine glanced at Evka and the look on his face matched how she felt. But when he turned back to Willem, it was as if they'd met on a late-night walk. As if nothing were wrong. If the kid weren't a werewolf, she'd have almost believed it herself. "It's nice to meet you, Willem. Your sister thought you might still be alive. She asked us for help."

"I didn't . . . kill . . . I didn't . . . it was . . . others." Willem was frantic. "Mina . . ."

"She's safe," Antoine said.

The werewolf trembled.

"This curse," Evka said softly. "If there isn't a way . . ."

"There may be," Antoine said. He sounded more hopeful than sure, but she'd asked. Evka exhaled slowly.

"All right," she said, then turned to the werewolf. "Willem, you need to come back with us."

"I can't . . . I might . . . hurt . . ." Willem whimpered.

"It's all right," Antoine said. He gestured to Evka's griffon insignia. "We're Grey Wardens."

"You won't hurt anyone," Evka said. "You have my word."

Evka knew that Antoine wanted the part where they saved the village. They would do what they had to—that's what Wardens do—but she could worry about that later.

***

In his dream he was dying . . .

With a tired groan, Antoine pulled himself out of bed. He skipped breakfast and headed straight for the stable out back.

Thick chains held Willem to the back of the stall. Thick chains sealed the door as well, and a large, heavy table had been pushed against it for good measure. Verschel's elderly gray had been moved to a neighbor's barn, unable to be anywhere near the young werewolf. Antoine sat on the table by the open half-door and tried to look encouraging.

"What happened then?" Evka asked.

"I . . . hurt . . . I was hungry . . . I was . . . this." Although he had room to walk around the small space, Willem sat pressed against the far wall. Antoine didn't think he feared the Wardens.

If the villagers had been unimpressed with the Wardens before, they were furious with them now. Bringing a werewolf back with them . . . they were supposed to be protecting the village—or failing at it—not making things worse. It was only the reputation of the larger Warden Order and Verschel's grumpy backing that kept Evka and Antoine from being run out of Eichweill and Willem from being torn apart. The only other person on their side was Mina. She'd insisted on being present, although she wouldn't come too close.

"Does it hurt?" Mina asked, her frame rigid.

"I can't . . . I want to go home . . ." Willem wrapped his overlong limbs around himself. Mina looked away, her posture a mirror of her brother's.

"The stories are all the same," Antoine said. "A demon possesses a wolf or a human and spreads its curse. The hero kills the source and the curse ends."

"A demon explains the voice in the woods," Evka said. "Have you heard it, Willem? Do you know where it is?"

Willem rocked back and forth.

"Was it near the split rock?" Evka tried again, but the werewolf didn't answer.

"Come on, Will," Mina said.

Willem snarled and his sister jumped back. "You were . . . gone."

Mina swallowed. She took a few steps closer, but her brother shifted, his hackles rising slightly, and she froze again. "I . . . found Wardens. If you've heard this voice, you have to tell them."

"I don't . . . I'm not . . ."

Ignoring the look Evka gave him, Antoine leaned casually over the stall door. "It's hard not having answers. Right now we're working off what I remember from stories. That's our whole plan. It's not very good, is it?"

Evka scowled but Willem had fallen quiet.

"Anything you say will be more than we know now," Antoine continued. "Which means you don't have to say much and anything you do say helps."

"Chantry," Willem coughed.

"The Chantry won't help now," Evka murmured.

"The . . . castle . . ."

Mina joined Antoine at the door. "The Broken Chantry. It's a ruin in the woods. North of here. We built a fort there—a castle. No one could find us. We haven't been back since . . ." She flicked a hand, dismissing the thought, and pressed on. "They say the brothers and sisters were off. The place went up in flames thirty years ago. Besides us, no one's been back."

"Of course," Evka said.

"Thank you, Willem," Antoine said.

"All right, bad plan or not, what do the stories say next?" Evka asked.

Antoine smiled. "That's it. The hero kills the demon, the curse ends, they all live happily and so on." This was more like it.

"And . . . me?" Willem asked.

Antoine took a deep breath before turning back to the boy. "You wait here for the story to end."

"Antoine," Evka murmured.

Antoine turned to her with a grin. "Back to work, yes?"

Outside the stable, the crowd alternated between glaring at the Wardens and pretending they hadn't been listening. Antoine smiled at them. It was only *partially* overcast for once and the Wardens had a plan —or at least a location. And a village to save whether the villagers believed it or not.

"We're off to defeat some werewolves or die trying," Antoine announced. "If the former, you're in luck. If the latter, you're no worse off."

The crowd stared at him, speechless. Evka snickered and Antoine's grin broadened.

"All right," Evka said. "Let's go."

***

The road that led to the Broken Chantry was barely visible, concealed by almost three decades of overgrowth. To make their lives harder, a mist had rolled in which Antoine called "ambiance" and Evka put on the same list as rain. Antoine marched a few paces ahead, ready to save the day. Or he thought he was.

"Antoine," Evka said.

"Yes?" He gave her a confused smile. He was off guard. That worked in her favor.

"When we find the leader . . . we can't be gentle."

"I know."

But that wasn't the only thing on her mind. "If Willem doesn't—"

"We aren't there yet," Antoine said. His fingers twitched at his side as if he were counting something. More plans, more ideas of how this might end.

"Wardens don't save everyone."

"No, but we try."

She took a deep breath. "Are you a liability?" It wasn't that she didn't trust him. He'd stood at her back, he . . . but that wasn't the point.

The hurt on his face twisted at her, and of all the heroic Warden traits he tried to embody, she wished he'd included the Order's fabled stoicism.

"We need to save Willem," he said, pacing away and then back again.

"He won't be the only one at risk if we're not careful."

"If you don't want me to . . ."

"I don't want you to die."

He stopped and looked at her. He was standing very still. It made her nervous when he stood that still. It meant he was focusing a hundred thoughts on something and right now that something was her. The forest was very quiet. Where was that damn crow when you needed it? Then Antoine's expression changed.

"Why are you smiling?"

He laughed. "I don't know. You don't want me to die."

"And that's your response?"

He was standing very still again. "Evka, I'll do everything I can . . ."

"I know." She started walking again before the conversation could continue.

Without warning, the stone walls of the Broken Chantry rose up out of the fog. Evka tapped Antoine's arm and led them over to a tangle of wild rosebushes. They ducked and she surveyed the building. Ivy grew over the walls, pushing through cracks and empty window frames. One of the side walls had collapsed and half the roof had caved in. The main door was rotted away, but somehow the stained-glass sun still glimmered faintly above the entry.

They could try circling the building, but it was hard to tell how large the Chantry was in the mist or how much cover they would have as they moved.

"Front door's as good as any," she said.

The arched entry opened onto a large stone floor covered in leaves. Mist skirted around a handful of benches, blackened reminders of the worshipers who once gathered there. The stone platform at the far end—where sisters must have sung the Chant of Light—now staged a fallen tree.

"Do you think it's—" A low moaning cut off Antoine's thought.

"We need to draw it out," Evka said.

"On it."

She heard the strike of flint and turned to see Antoine fiddling with the Qunari cylinders he'd bought the day before. Bright white sparks burst from the tube.

"It works!" Antoine said, delight replacing unease. Then "Ah!" as the sparks started streaming faster and he tossed the tube away from himself.

It skittered into the fog, briefly illuminating a large silhouette before going dark.

"The boy gave us away. Predictable," the voice came out of the fog, cold and echoing. It was the same voice they'd heard by the ram.

"Consider yourself called," Evka said, hurling a knife through the mist. It made a useless clattering sound as it landed on the ground out of sight.

"Did you leave the boy alive?" The voice came from the left.

"Your curse hasn't taken him," Antoine said.

"It will," the voice said. *"He will hunger. And who will be in his way? His sister?"*

"You know them," Evka said. Eichweill hadn't been struck by a random curse—it was a targeted one. Given the village's overall luck, she didn't know if that was better or worse.

"Yes," said the voice and the werewolf stepped out of the fog.

It was massive—easily twice the size of the other werewolves they'd faced. Its fur was jet black and its mouth dripped with foam.

Evka dodged as the werewolf lunged forward, smashing one of the remaining benches to pieces.

"Who are you?" Evka asked.

The voice sounded smaller for a moment, but no less cruel. "They cast me from their cursed village. As if I wanted it."

Antoine took a shot, but the werewolf slid clear and disappeared back into the mist.

"He did want it. He wanted it all." The voice was deeper again. Laced through with something darker.

Antoine shook his head, as if trying to dislodge something.

The werewolf charged again, bursting from the fog and barging into Evka, knocking her to the ground. She rolled clear of its massive, long-fingered paws and jumped back to her feet.

Antoine loosed a volley of arrows, but the beast barely noticed. Evka swore internally—whatever the creature was in the flesh, it would draw strength from the demon possessing it.

The werewolf turned its yellow eyes on Antoine and howled. The sound echoed off the stone walls of the Broken Chantry. Antoine took

another shot but the werewolf struck out, knocking the elf into another bench, his bow falling from his grasp.

"Who are you?" Evka yelled again, trying to draw the werewolf's attention back to her.

The beast's voice lost its echo. "They left me for dead. I took what was mine."

"Renke," Evka said, remembering the tour of Eichweill—the nobles' son who'd murdered the Chantry brother.

The sound of the name drew the beast's focus. It stalked lazily toward her, its voice doubled again. *"It was winter. He didn't know how to escape the woods. He was starving. He hungered. Then he hungered for more. We will feast on Eichweill."* Then back to a single cord. "After I watch them writhe."

"What are you now?" Evka said, holding her ax ready. Demons could be a lot of things—Pride, Desire, Fear—but they always loved talking about themselves. What had possessed the nobles' son? Behind the monster that was Renke, Antoine pulled himself to his feet.

"Renke was starving," the werewolf snarled. *"I answered."*

"What are you?" Evka shouted.

"Hunger," Antoine said.

Before Evka could react, Renke charged forward and grabbed the ax's handle in his jaws. With a twist of his head, both dwarf and weapon were sailing across the room. Evka heard a *crack* as she hit the wall. A rotting support beam swung loose, pinning her down.

***

"Evka!" Antoine yelled. He tried to run to her, but the werewolf whipped around and pinned Antoine to the ground with its massive bulk. Even through his leather overcoat, the beast's dark claws drove into his shoulders, threatening to break the skin. He wasn't sure if that was enough for the curse to set in. He didn't want to find out.

"So, you can guess a name."

Antoine's head ached as the demon possessing Renke tried to access his thoughts. When the darkspawn song was in his head, it sang of a death in his future. The demon grasped at the one in his past.

"*Ah yes. You have hungered. When you were dying . . . what did that feel like . . .*"

It burned and he couldn't think straight. It felt like nothing and that was just as bad . . .

"That's over," Antoine said. He focused on the memory of Evka's voice telling him what had happened. He was a Warden now. A hero.

The demon laughed. *"Did you think you'd escaped?"*

Antoine struggled beneath Renke's paws. He needed a way out. He needed a plan . . .

"What you have's not what you thought, is it? You're deprived the admiration. The heroics."

No, that wasn't right. That's not what this was about. Antoine tried to shift his arms beneath the werewolf's weight.

It's not what it was supposed to be about.

"Would they sate you?"

Antoine's fingers brushed the end of his bow but it was out of reach. That wasn't going to work.

"You will join me. You will devour what you thought to save."

Antoine's other hand knocked one of the silver cylinders loose from his belt. It rolled across the uneven Chantry floor with a small plinking noise. He reached again, his hand closing around glass . . .

Renke lowered a tooth-filled jaw to Antoine's ear. *"Tell me, elf, are you hungry?"*

***

Evka pushed herself free of the beam, grabbed her ax, and ran toward Antoine. The werewolf reared back, its jaws open. She wasn't going to make it. Antoine twisted sideways, one arm flailing upward.

Renke's jaw snapped shut.

And the Chantry filled with a dark, billowing smoke.

Renke roared.

"What—" Evka said, startled.

"It's a distraction!" She heard an arrow pierce flesh at close range. Renke howled again.

"That's not a warning!" Evka said.

Through the trailing ends of the smoke, they could see the werewolf take off. By the time the fog cleared, it was gone.

***

"We'll think of a plan," Antoine said for the third time.

The Wardens were in the inn's dining room with Verschel, Mina, and several other villagers who'd come for news of the Wardens' success—or lack thereof.

"We were holding Renke for the king's justice, bastard got away," Verschel said. "With the snows, we figured running him out was just as good. Figured him dead."

"He nearly was," Antoine replied. "But something found him."

"I thought you were going to kill werewolves or die trying. You failed at both," said the candlemaker. There were nods of agreement.

"If you want to borrow my ax, I'll give you a turn at it," Evka said. The candlemaker pursed her lips but said nothing.

"We'll think of a plan." Antoine said for the fourth time, then turned for the door.

"Where are you going?" Evka asked.

"To check on Willem," he said. He couldn't stay there. He needed to do something.

Antoine could hear the inhuman growling coming from the stable before he went inside. Willem paced back and forth on all fours, snarling and frothing at the mouth, stopping only to pull against the thick chains that were just strong enough to hold him.

"Willem, if there's anything else you can tell us . . ." Antoine said.

"Antoine." Evka had followed him. Mina hovered in the doorway, refusing to cross over the entrance. Antoine ignored them.

"Even a word. We just need to stop him."

But the werewolf was past the point of gentle words and a friendly smile.

"You tried," Mina said, but she sounded like everyone else in Eichweill—unimpressed, unenthused. She walked away, tears running down her face.

Antoine didn't move from the stable door. "I'm still trying."

Willem leapt for the door—or more likely for Antoine himself. Antoine jumped back, startled, while the chains yanked Willem down in the opposite direction. They wouldn't hold forever.

Evka touched Antoine lightly on the arm. He didn't want to think about what happened to Willem now. He turned without looking at her and left the stable, stalking back to the main street. His eyes darted to

the buildings, down side paths, his fingers twitching, his mind working. He came to the well and stopped. This wasn't how it was supposed to be.

What you have's not what you thought, is it?

Even when it wasn't in his head, it was in his head. He kicked the well in frustration.

"You regret that, don't you?" Evka said lightly.

Antoine laughed despite himself. "Yes." He tapped his foot gingerly on the ground a few times, then sank down and sat with his back to the well, staring at the boarded-up Renke house.

"I should have died," he said finally.

"I've pointed that out," Evka said.

"I didn't want to. If a demon had found me, would I . . ." He gestured at Renke's house.

"It didn't," Evka said. "So, it doesn't matter."

"I woke up with a second chance. If I don't do everything with it, what's the point?"

Would that sate you?

Antoine's fingers twitched. He tried again: "If what I do with it isn't . . . Maybe I'm not . . ." But he didn't know how to finish the thought.

Evka sat down next to Antoine. "Here's what I know about being a Grey Warden: You fight the worst monsters in Thedas, most people don't notice, and then you do it again. We've got a thankless village, a werewolf we've barely been able to hit—"

"A demon that can get in my head," Antoine offered.

"And that. That's what Wardens do. We take all of that and handle it. Because someone has to. You're a Warden because everything that could go wrong has and you're still here." She punched him gently on the shoulder and smiled. "All we need is a plan."

All he wanted was to sit at the well with her a little longer. But there was work to do. They needed a plan. He jumped to his feet, took a few steps toward Renke's house and then back to the well. They had a thankless village, a werewolf they'd barely been able to hit . . .

"Do you have a plan?" Evka asked.

"Not a good one," Antoine said.

"It's a start."

Antoine grinned.

***

Evka stood alone by the well.

It was dark. The moon was the thinnest curl it could be, but at least it was out. Behind her lights flickered in the Renke house. She let out a slow breath.

She could hear Willem start to howl, his transformed cries carrying from the direction of the inn.

And they were answered.

Evka gripped her ax a little tighter. "Renke!" she yelled.

There was a moment of silence. Then the voice came out of the shadows. *"Waiting for me?"*

There was no other sound except Willem's howling. They'd killed three werewolves in the woods and faced Renke alone in the Chantry. "Just you?" she said casually.

"Not for long," Renke replied.

Alone for now, then. That was one thing in their favor. Maybe. Evka had a feeling it only made Renke more dangerous.

"Where's your friend?"

"I don't like the way you talk to him," she said.

Renke's cold laughter was cut off by the bang of a shutter behind her. When the voice spoke again, it had lost some of its echo. "That's mine."

"You count on them being separated. We can't guard everywhere at once. One house—I can watch that." She glanced behind her at the flickering lights, the shadows moving behind the shutters. Evka smiled at Renke. "No one was using this one."

"It's mine!" Renke yelled. The beast erupted from the shadows and crossed the distance between them in a few long strides.

Evka couldn't hope to be faster than the werewolf, but she'd fought this one already. Before the words were out of its mouth, she'd rolled to the side and struck out with her ax. Renke dodged, but Evka already had a knife in her hand.

Evka whipped the knife hard and was met with a satisfying yowl as it sunk deep into Renke's shoulder. It wasn't enough to stop the beast—she didn't know what that would take—but she took advantage of the wolf's momentary pain to run clear of its thrashing and place herself between it and the front door.

"You want to protect these people. You've gathered them for a feast," Renke's voice reverberated.

Evka stood her ground and waited. If she was right, the beast would charge . . .

And it did. Evka held her position as the werewolf raced forward, claws and teeth ready to tear through the dwarf in its way. At the last moment, Evka ducked and rolled to the side. The werewolf slammed past her and through the front door . . .

***

Antoine watched from the stairs as a storm of splinters burst inward, followed by Renke. The beast's eyes shone and saliva foamed from its jaws, dripping to the worn floorboards. It snapped a chair in half and hurled the broken pieces across the room before blinking, confusion starting to show on its contorted face.

A fire burned in the fireplace. Lanterns flickered against the walls casting shadows through the room. Especially when Antoine tugged on the rope attached to them.

"What is this?" the werewolf snarled.

"A trap," Antoine said.

The villagers didn't like the Wardens, but after the disastrous patrol, they were willing to darken their houses and stay out of sight. It wasn't much—but it was all they needed. He tugged on the lanterns again. "Did it work?"

The werewolf howled as Evka raced through the door and sunk her ax into its hind leg.

Inside the Renke house, there were no shadows for the werewolf to hide in, no room for the beast to run from the range of Evka's ax. She sliced at its legs, its shoulders, its ribs. While Renke crashed and twisted to fight, Evka ducked and moved around it. From his place on the stairs, Antoine fired down on the thrashing monster.

The beast was bleeding and there was a ragged sound to its breathing. They had it . . .

Until they didn't.

With a swiftness that suggested it wasn't as injured as they'd thought, the werewolf hurled itself at Evka, knocking her into the stone fireplace. She gasped as the air escaped her lungs. Before she could draw another breath, Renke grabbed her and slammed her to the ground. Antoine

fired an arrow, but the beast shrugged it off. A ropy string of drool oozed down onto Evka's face.

Then a sweet roll smacked the werewolf in the head.

"Renke," Antoine said. "Are you hungry?"

Renke twisted and ran for the stairs faster than Antoine had expected. He scrambled backward and launched himself into the upper hallway, the werewolf chasing after. Antoine ran a few paces, then threw himself sideways through an open door, barely avoiding Renke as the monster barreled down the hall.

Antoine found himself in a dusty bedroom. His fingers twitched: modest size, no exits except for the hall and a window that faced the main road. He was cornered.

Throwing the sweet roll hadn't been much of a plan, but it had worked. Now he needed another one—and he didn't have a lot of time to think.

The monster that was Renke stood in the doorway. It howled—an awful empty moaning sound—then stood and walked forward with an unnatural, halting gait.

"Another chance and this life could be even better. You can taste it."

"No," Antoine said. He could hear the truth in the words. But he was a Warden. His job was to handle it anyway.

He raised his bow, but Renke was too close. The werewolf knocked the weapon aside before Antoine could level it and grabbed the elf by the throat.

That was another thing Wardens did—they died fighting the monster.

But Renke didn't want him dead.

The werewolf tightened its clawed hand and Antoine felt the skin break. Blood trickled down his neck. *"You'll devour all those fools who didn't care. After you gnaw on the dwarf's bones."*

"You're wrong," Antoine said.

Renke flicked a pointed ear back. "There she is now."

Evka stood in the doorway, ax ready.

But she was too late.

Renke sunk his teeth into Antoine's shoulder. Antoine screamed.

With a satisfied smile, Renke dropped the elf on the floor.

"You're dead," Evka said.

"Evka—" Antoine said. As heroic as dying facing monsters sounded, he didn't want to die.

"Not you," Evka said.

He reached for the pouches at his waist.

"Evka—distraction!"

Evka was already moving as the room filled with white sparks, the light blinding in the small space.

Renke snarled, then screamed as Evka's ax sank deep into its back. Antoine barely managed to throw himself out of the way as the monster lurched forward.

Evka let go of the ax handle and jumped to the bed. Planting a foot firmly on the mattress, she leaped upward. As she came down, she drove her last knife into Renke.

The beast's final howl was cut short as Evka drew the blade along its throat. As she finished, Antoine pulled himself up and kicked Renke with all the strength he had left.

The beast stumbled forward and crashed through the window.

It hit the ground below with a sickening *crack*.

Evka was blinking hard. "I thought you were going to use the vials."

"He knew that one already."

"It's only a warning if I know what you're warning me about." Evka blinked again, then gave Antoine a look. "You almost died. Stop laughing when I say that."

He grinned. He hadn't died—they hadn't died. They had beaten a werewolf and Antoine was still breathing. And Evka was standing very close to him.

"We should . . ."

"Make sure it's dead?"

Antoine touched his shoulder where Renke had bitten him. Ending the night as a werewolf was not how it was supposed to work.

A small crowd was cautiously approaching Renke's former house, drawn by the silence that had followed the battle inside. The werewolf's eyes were dull and empty, its spine bent at an odd angle. Antoine didn't know if they'd killed the demon inside or if it had fled. Either way, it appeared to be gone.

"There's that done," Verschel said, giving the beast a sullen kick and watching it flop lifelessly back. He looked at Antoine. "You worked out, then."

It was the highest praise they could ask for.

Mina didn't say anything. She was running for the inn.

* * *

Evka watched as Antoine said goodbye to the people of Eichweill. The villagers were as grudging and unenthusiastic in their thanks as they were about most things, but Antoine smiled as if they'd thrown the Wardens a parade. If there was any doubt of Renke's curse being gone, the brown-haired boy with wolf-yellow eyes put it to rest. Mina had an arm around the boy's shoulders and the pair waved to them as they left.

"So, we rode into town," Antoine said.

"We walked. Because we lost the horses."

"Saved the horses. And the village."

"To thunderous applause. And it will probably be overrun by locusts when we leave."

"What now?" he asked.

"Weisshaupt Fortress?" she said. "The part of being a Warden where we report where we're supposed to and get told what to do without being sidetracked."

"Bien sûr—on y va! No detours!" His grin said he didn't believe the last part. She wasn't sure she did either.

***

Small, banished.

Powerless.

But if it waited, it would sense the knot that twisted its victim. The weakness that followed. The opening. The longing. And just before the blackness fell, when they would do almost anything, it would whisper . . .

Are you hungry?

MURDER BY DEATH MAGES

CAITLIN SULLIVAN KELLY

Damned statues.

She had always hated them; hated the overexaggerated poses, hated the reminders of impossible achievements constantly hanging over everyone, hated how people worshiped and prayed at what was nothing more than pretty hunks of stone. She hated them when she was young and alone, cowering in alleyways and begging for scraps while other children played with toy swords in the monuments' shadows, shouting over who got to be which famous dragon hunter. Crowing as they slew imaginary archdemons.

When she joined the Inquisition, Sidony believed she'd never have to walk the streets of Nevarra City again; never have to see the vacuous nobles waste good coin on frivolity and shallow attempts at dressing the monuments to their ancestors prettier than their rivals could dress theirs. But here she was, pushing through clustered knots of artists and florists and actors bustling about the garish things with enough flowers, candles, and drapes to fill every chantry in Thedas.

She had never cared for the pageantry of this tradition or understood why the rich and powerful spent so much to revere their dead. The dead were all the same: just food for scavengers or tools to use in battle. If the nobility thought retelling the heroic triumphs of their bloodlines year

after year meant they shared in those accomplishments, they were mistaken. Nevarran nobles weren't good for anything anymore.

Except maybe Cassandra Pentaghast.

***

Sidony had found it amusing how Pentaghast's brow furrowed as she read the letter Sidony had brought to her. She couldn't say she had felt the same kind of alarm when *she* had first received it.

Pentaghast's concerns had been so great that she immediately whisked the letter away to a meeting with the other Inquisition leaders. They could not easily overlook claims that a Mortalitasi—one of the influential and highly respected mages charged with tending Nevarra's dead—was planning to assassinate a member of Nevarra's already unstable line of succession. Especially when those claims came straight from another Mortalitasi, one that Sidony once knew.

Later, Pentaghast—bearing her usual grave expression—had summoned Sidony to the Inquisition's war room with a simple order: Return to Nevarra City and put an end to the Mortalitasi's plot. Quietly, and before further intervention was required.

Sidony had protested—she had no desire to set foot in that place ever again. "There are other Nevarrans in the Inquisition; send one of them."

"None of the other Nevarrans have your intimate knowledge of the Mortalitasi," Pentaghast reminded her.

"And none of the other Nevarrans would rather feed themselves to a wyvern than return to Nevarra City," Sidony replied.

"Any mage in the Grand Necropolis could be involved. If we send anyone else to question Lord Henrik, do you think he would trust that they were not sent to silence him?"

"I don't care," Sidony spat. "I have no interest in getting mixed up in whatever diplomatic scuffle is brewing between the Mortalitasi and the nobles."

"The matter is simpler than you're making it out to be, Sidony." Pentaghast's voice began to echo off the ceiling of the war room. "Go to the Grand Necropolis. Learn which Mortalitasi is this would-be assassin, then stop them. There is already so much tension among the royal families, something like this could be what tips the whole country into

chaos. The Inquisitor does not wish to see that happen to Nevarra. Not if we can stop it."

"That doesn't sound simple to me."

Pentaghast sighed. "Our only lead has asked for *you*, and *you* will be the one to go. That is an *order*."

Sidony had snatched the letter out of Pentaghast's hand before turning to go.

"Lord Henrik has put himself in a precarious position by informing us of this. Do you really not wish to help him?" Pentaghast had asked. "He saved you, raised you. Taught you what you know."

"A Mortalitasi does not *save* anyone. Anything that isn't a corpse just gets in their way. You should know that better than anyone, Seeker."

It was the last thing Sidony had said before storming out through the war room's massive door.

Those words echoed in Sidony's head as she continued down the bustling street, louder and louder until she had to duck into an alleyway, out from under the stony glares of the statues. The more she looked at them, the more they twisted and contorted until all she could see was the vacant face of Henrik's lifeless body. *He got in a Mortalitasi's way—but which one?*

She leaned against the cool stone wall of the alley, deep in the slanting shadow cast by the setting sun, and let out a harsh breath. Her teeth clenched as a memory filled her vision, one of her, deep in the Grand Necropolis, standing next to a granite table used to prepare the dead for their interment. She balled her hands into shaking fists and pressed them to her eyelids, fighting against the sight of Henrik's withered body on the table. But no matter how hard she fought, the memory of his mangled limbs, and his skin drained of all color, would not leave her mind.

She bent forward at the waist, remembering how she had demanded the other Mortalitasi tell her what had happened, how their voices had shouted over her questions, desperate to stop the scene she was making. The accusations and threats she had hurled, even as they grabbed her by the arms and forced her from the Necropolis, did nothing to make them tell her what she wanted to know. About what happened to Henrik. About anything he might have known about an assassin scheming in the shadows, poised to strike. An assassin hidden well within the ranks of powerful mages—considered nigh untouchable by most of Nevarra.

The matter is simpler than you're making it out to be, Sidony.

Simple. Except for the fact that the Mortalitasi refused to answer her questions, and the only man who could have guided her to the killer she was hunting was dead. With no one to turn to for answers, she had failed before she had even started.

The sun slipped away into twilight. Sitting in the darkened alleyway, Sidony remembered another moment.

She couldn't recall how old she had been at that time, or how long it had been since her mother had chased her from their home after discovering Sidony's magic. She had been curled up in an alley just like this one, struggling to conjure even the smallest spark to keep out the bitter cold, when an austere-looking man had bent down beside her and peered at what she was doing.

She had scrambled away, thinking she had met her end. This man had come to imprison her, or kill her, or whatever else the rest of the world did to little girls with magic.

"You're scaring the poor thing, Henrik," a bright-faced woman with hair the color of burnished brass had said from where she hovered in the alley's opening.

"It's all right, Antonia. She just needs some help," the man had replied. He stretched his hands toward Sidony, and she tentatively leaned forward. A bright, dancing flame burst from his palms, engulfing Sidony in warmth; her first magic lesson.

For all the years she had lived with Henrik after that, he had been a recluse, immersing himself in his studies within the Necropolis and in training Sidony. She searched her memories, and she couldn't think of a single person he had ever trusted, or even called a friend; except for that mage—*Antonia*—in the alleyway that night.

If she was the only person Henrik trusted enough to know that he taken a young, cast-off mage from the streets, what other secrets had he confided in her?

***

The woman was easy enough to find. Few Mortalitasi came into the city unless they were tending to the business of a death, and even fewer Mortalitasi matched Antonia's description.

Sidony only had to ask a few people before she picked up a trail. Each person she questioned was spellbound when they realized exactly who the "old friend" Sidony was looking for was. They eagerly pointed her to the place where they saw the woman most: a nearby tavern frequented by heavy gamblers.

Night had completely fallen by the time Sidony found the place. Inside, she spotted Antonia instantly, dressed in unadorned burgundy robes and wearing the same bright face she saw the night Henrik found her.

In the Inquisition, Sidony had witnessed a fair share of things that were odd or unexplainable, but seeing a death mage tucked away in the corner of a rowdy tavern, happily poring over a small stack of books while the other patrons not-so-subtly watched from a respectful distance, was something else entirely.

Sidony walked to the back of the dimly lit room, rolling her eyes as those she passed pretended not to stare over their cups.

Wood scraped across stone as she roughly yanked the chair opposite the yellow-haired Mortalitasi backward and sat down. A man wearing a loose shirt and apron rushed over, but one scornful look from Sidony sent him back behind the bar. Antonia's serene look lifted into a smirk as she flipped the next page of her book.

A moment passed in silence, broken only by the sounds of scraping parchment, a wine goblet being picked up and put back down, and the soft murmur of conversation from the rest of the tavern.

Words were difficult for Sidony on most occasions, and now she was really unsure how to begin. This woman may have been someone Henrik trusted, but she was still a Mortalitasi.

What do you know? Who are your allies? What could she possibly ask that didn't give away who she was really looking for?

"Still silent as the grave. That hasn't changed," came the voice from the other side of the table.

"What?" Sidony asked.

"The night that I met you, you refused to so much as say hello," the death mage replied, eyes still turned down toward her book. "Henrik often told me how difficult it was, raising a young girl who wouldn't open her mouth and speak."

"I speak when it's necessary." Sidony paused. "How much time has passed since you've last seen me? More years than I can count, yet you

still know me on sight?"

Antonia closed her book and smiled. Not out of amusement; it was a calm and tranquil expression.

"Sidony, is it strange that I recognize a girl my very good friend used to tell me about every day? Henrik had his . . . frustrations with you, especially about you choosing to run off and leave the Mortalitasi, but he had so many *fond* things to say about you, too."

Antonia placed her book on top of the pile before smoothing her long plait over the front of her shoulder. Sidony idly wondered how her hair had retained its hue after all these years.

"And honestly," Antonia chuckled, "once you see that dark, sour-faced expression of yours, it's hard to forget. That part hasn't changed much either."

"I have no interest in trading petty barbs with you," Sidony spat. "If you know who I am, then you know why I am here."

"I can probably guess, but please, elaborate. I'm enjoying your natural gift for conversation." Antonia's smile widened.

Sidony sneered. She never expected this woman to freely give her the answers she needed, but she couldn't read anything about her, or what she knew about Henrik's suspicions—if she knew anything at all—or where her loyalties lay.

Sidony could feel this lead slipping away, like she had when she discovered what had happened to Henrik.

But if this woman had been Henrik's friend, shouldn't she be concerned about his fate? If Sidony could convince Antonia that she had returned to Nevarra City to learn what happened to him, play on her sympathies until she learned the truth . . . it could put her back on the assassin's trail.

"I'm here for Henrik. What happened to him?" Sidony asked. "I saw his body. That was no natural death. The others refused to tell me anything, then they threw me out."

Antonia frowned, and her eyes flicked away.

"Would you like to come to a party?" she asked, looking back.

Sidony worked her jaw and fixed her gaze squarely at the woman, trying to follow where she could possibly be leading. Her fists slowly clenched in her lap.

"*No*, I would *not*," she replied.

"Are you sure?" The woman stood and gathered her few books under her arm. "I'm certain you'd find it very entertaining."

Sidony pushed back from the table and stood, her right fist flying behind her back, magic cracking and sparking in her palm. This woman would speak to her one way or another, and she didn't care who saw.

"I don't find much of anything *entertaining*. Parties, least of all," Sidony said as she stepped in Antonia's way, blocking her from leaving the table. "You are not leaving until you answer my questions."

"Lady Antonia, is—is she bothering you? Should I—remove her?" The bartender who had cleaned the same glass at least six times since Sidony first sat at the table suddenly found the courage to approach the pair of mages.

Antonia put up her free hand toward him. "As amusing as it would be to see you try, I think you'd better let me handle this," she said. The barkeep's confidence faltered, and he hesitantly backed away.

The knowing smile Antonia wore vanished as she closed the distance between them. When she was close enough that no one, not even the nervous bartender, could hear her, Antonia spoke. "If I just turn you loose, you'll get yourself killed."

Sidony relaxed her fist, and the tingle of magic subsided.

Antonia adjusted her books and said, just as quietly, "Someone in this city has made a name for himself turning over every stone in Nevarra, unearthing debauchery and corruption for anyone who can pay for it."

Turning Sidony toward the door, Antonia guided her gently through the room. Eyes openly stared over rims of cups and over the tops of cards as they walked, the pretense of minding their own business abandoned long ago.

"No one's secrets are safe from him," she continued. "Not the rich, not the powerful, not even those who hide down in the darkest depths of the Necropolis. If someone is hiding something from you, he can help you learn what it is."

They stepped into the chilly dark, and Antonia released Sidony. "In front of the statue of Tylus Van Markham, the one by the river, there's a manor with a red door. Be there tomorrow evening."

For a brief moment, Antonia regarded her with a serious look. Then she turned and walked back up the avenue, flickering candles at the base of the monuments lighting the path in front of her feet.

Damned statues.

* * *

The sun had fallen below the river's opposite shore when Sidony finally stepped from behind the towering relief of Tylus Van Markham.

With the hood of her raiment pulled far around the sharp angles of her face, she had watched the guests as they filed into the smooth stone manor across the boulevard. The men and women attending the fête were dressed in fine garments and flaunting more jewels than the richest dwarven merchant.

Sidony marched toward the manor's entrance, tugging her hood away from her face and smoothing back her chin-length brown hair. Straightening her robes and wiping the city's grime from her mantle did nothing to make her look as extravagant as the other revelers, but at least she wouldn't stand out as much as she quietly slipped into the back of a raucous group of guests bursting through the front door.

She barely had a chance to take in her surroundings in the imposing entryway before a yellow-haired blur swung her into an adjoining room.

Antonia grabbed her arms before the defensive spell that leapt into Sidony's mind could make its way to her fingertips.

"It's me!" Antonia hissed.

Sidony calmed the spark of magic before stepping back and yanking her arms out of Antonia's grip.

"I apologize," Antonia said, doing a poor job of stifling a laugh as she looked over Sidony, "but you stood out the moment you stepped inside the door. I didn't want you to draw too much attention."

Antonia's deep bloodred coat was designed to facilitate quick movement, cut to a length that put her black leather leggings and black boots on full display. Silver bangles twisted and coiled up her one bare arm, and despite the ensemble's utilitarian quality, she was every bit as elegant and refined as the other nobles. She seemed as comfortable here as she was in the tavern.

"And being shoved into a private chamber by a Mortalitasi dressed like a spindleweed bunch *won't* draw attention?" Sidony asked.

"No more than usual. Everyone's used to that sort of thing at these parties." That serene smile crept along Antonia's face, as if she were merely explaining the ways of the world to an ignorant child.

Sidony rolled her eyes. "Enough. I told you, I don't like parties, and I'm not here for fun. Tell me where I can find this 'secret dealer' you

mentioned."

Antonia sighed. "He's upstairs. Flitting from crowd to crowd like a butterfly and pretending that no one notices him listening in. The lords and ladies feign disgust at his brazen eavesdropping to make their rivals believe that no one here would dare even speak to him."

"I'm not interested in their *games*," Sidony sneered. Her fists clenched and unclenched a few times.

"It's part of it! They *all* turn around and whisper their gossip to him when they're sure no one's listening.

"Open a book on Nevarra's royal families and point to any name. By the end of the night, he'll have pieced together enough of a scandal to bring them down. I'm sure he could blackmail the entirety of King Markus's court if he wanted to—maybe even the king himself, if he were lucid enough to know he was being extorted.

"If anyone can find the truth about what happened to Henrik, he can."

Or, Sidony thought, he can tell me which one of you is a murderer, and which useless noble is the prey.

Antonia removed a ring from her hand—a large ruby cradled in a silver setting, detailed with what looked like finger bones—and slipped it onto Sidony's finger. "At least try to look like you belong here." She again smiled.

Flexing her fingers, Sidony flattened her lips into a line as she toyed with the unfamiliar weight.

"Do you do this often?" she asked. "Drink in taverns while you study? Revel with hypocritical nobles and their information dealers? I don't remember many Mortalitasi leaving the Necropolis for these kinds of social calls."

"It's gotten a bit too quiet down there for me, in recent years." Antonia's smile widened. "I've grown to prefer . . . *livelier* settings."

No serious answer, then, Sidony thought. She turned and opened the ornately carved door. Music and the sounds of a lively debate between nearby guests spilled into the room.

"When the dead are brought to us," Antonia said, "I feel . . . regret."

Sidony stopped in the door frame and looked at her. Antonia's smile was gone, replaced by a far-off look. "Regret that I'd never known these people in life. What drove them, what terrifed them . . . what killed them.

"The people of Nevarra hold the Mortalitasi in very high regard—they *admire* us. They appreciate our knowledge and our counsel, and they respect the important role we play in this country. Too many of my colleagues repay their confidence with avoidance."

Antonia walked a few paces forward, looking straight into Sidony's face. "*I* am trying to tend more to the living, to get to know them and let them get to know me. They deserve to believe that I'm not only interested in getting my hands on their corpses one day. I do what I can to assure them of that, even if it's . . . how did you describe it? 'Reveling with the hypocrites'?"

She glided past Sidony into the entrance hall.

"Wait upstairs. I'll make sure our man finds you," she said, before disappearing into the party.

Sidony couldn't understand Antonia's desire to ingratiate herself with the people of Nevarra City. If she could have it her way, she would leave the vapid creatures to fend for themselves, put them miles behind her on the road out of Nevarra. But she'd be lying if she said she didn't understand Antonia's feelings of regret: regrets like unfinished business, an assassin slipping through her fingers—or words she'd never gotten to say to a dead man down in the Necropolis.

She considered slamming the door as she entered the party, but that would draw too much attention.

***

Men and women excitedly hurried past Sidony as she ascended the wide staircase. Upstairs, the party was even livelier than it was below: styles of music from instruments she'd never heard filled each room she passed; laughter and cheers erupted from tables of card games. Couples danced and men slapped each other on the back, and everywhere she looked was another rich spread of food and drink.

Sidony moved to the outer edges of the raucous crowds. Enormous portraits in gilded frames loomed above her as she kept close to the walls. She spotted an empty, out-of-the-way oriel with delicately paned windows that would serve as a quick escape if things turned desperate.

It was the perfect place to wait for Antonia's so-called scandal-maker. The rowdy guests were too preoccupied to notice an unaccompanied woman keeping her distance from the entertainment, glowering at them

as they danced and embraced and strolled, watching their faces for any sign of who she was looking for.

Hours passed in that corner without any sign from the secret dealer, or even Antonia. No one had even glanced in her direction. Her frustration once again for control of the search was suffocating.

Inhaling sharply, she turned and glared down on the street below, considering her next move. Dozens of candles burned at the base of that repulsively opulent Tylus Van Markham statue, casting a dim glow where she had hidden earlier that evening. There, just beyond the reach of the candles' light, barely visible, was a figure, standing as still as the statue itself.

She could feel magic radiating from the dark form, cold sensations of death that, even from this distance, made the hair on her arms stand on end. She watched the shadow where it lurked, waiting for it to move.

"Sickening, isn't it?"

Sidony tore her eyes away and turned. A young man dressed in an ornately patterned coat looked past her to the street below. Her face twisted into a frown, and the man laughed.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you," he said. "I was talking about that irritatingly ostentatious statue. I would wager Tylus Van Markham never found an occasion to pose like *that*."

Sidony turned her back and looked down again. The dark figure had disappeared, and she felt her body tense in annoyance. The man behind her didn't seem to notice. Or he didn't care.

"I'm so *sick* of seeing that pretentious shrine. We can't even walk the streets in peace without the Van Markhams' constant desperate reminders that their station is far above our own. If they lived in the present, like the rest of us, maybe they'd have more to contribute to the country than plotting against every other noble family in between drunken alley spats."

"I don't give a shit about the Van Markhams," Sidony threw over her shoulder.

The disgust dripped from his voice, "A *Pentaghast* woman, then?"

Sidony barked out a laugh. If only the Pentaghast woman responsible for her being here could see this.

"No," she snapped as she faced him. "I am not a *Pentaghast woman*. And I am not a *Van Markham woman*. I have more important things to concern myself with than that centuries-old pissing match."

"Interesting." The man smirked. "Right now, you'd be hard-pressed to find anyone in Nevarra who thinks *anything* is more important than that."

He rubbed his chin and asked, "When our frail king is gone, with no one to succeed him, do you think the Pentaghasts and Van Markhams will continue their squabble over the rightful heir in spirited discussions, behind closed doors?"

Just as she started to tell him she'd grown tired of his manifesto, her eyes leapt to his crimson gloves as he tugged at their cuffs. Expensively made, like the rest of his clothes; anyone could tell, even at first glance. Intricate stitching in the shape of a quill bloomed from the seams.

Although Henrik had never prepared her for interacting with them, he had heavily emphasized learning about the royal families of her country: their tumultuous histories, their acrimonious rivalries, their ever-changing status within the king's court. As much as she had tried to resist the lessons, many details still managed to sink in. Enough, at least, for her to know that a quill was the heraldry of House Reinhardt: a minor family, but one of the oldest in Nevarra. The branches of their family tree stretched into the neighboring Free Marches and into Orlais, but they never held much influence over their own nation.

"No!" the man continued, oblivious to her silence. "They'll drag their war into the streets! Good people will fight and die for arrogant families who have no interest in listening to the rest of us."

Damn it, Antonia, Sidony thought as she searched the crowd for an opening to escape the chattering windbag. Too much time had been wasted. She'd have to find a way forward in her pursuit, without the scandal-maker's help.

"And the longer they bicker, the longer the kingdom has no heir . . . the longer they allow those damn Mortalitasi to circle the king like vultures, whispering in his ear . . ."

Sidony's eyes snapped back to the Reinhardt lord. A man drunk enough—or stupid enough—to shout accusations that the death mages were ruling the kingdom through manipulation was a man who might let slip rumors about a Mortalitasi assassin's plan to remove a noble from play . . . if he wasn't a target himself.

"With no heir, the throne will sit empty, just *waiting* for those damned death mages to slither in and—"

A man quickly walking past them bumped into Reinhardt, cutting off the next part of his commentary. The glass he'd been holding fell to the ground. A servant appeared, as if from nowhere, to collect it and disappeared just as quickly.

"The Mortalitasi?" Sidony prompted in an attempt to regain his attention, impatience eating away at her.

"Yes, Nicolas, tell us all about those terrifying death mages, tell us all about how they've infiltrated the king's chambers, how they've made themselves the secret rulers of Nevarra!" a mocking voice rang out as a pair of graceful hands brushed off Reinhardt's jacket and straightened his shirt.

"I was about to." Reinhardt scowled as he batted the man's hands away. "But it seems there's not much left to say, now that you've blurted it all out, Cyrros."

Cyrros laughed, and Sidony glared at the interruption. He was dressed as well as most of the noblemen here, almost as lavishly as Reinhardt. His thick, honey-colored curls were slicked back in a way that *almost* fully hid the tapered point of his ears. An elf in such finery, mocking and touching a member of old Nevarran nobility, and no one batting an eye—this was someone welcomed with open arms and stacks of gold in circles fueled by secrets and scandal.

"Nicolas, you're neglecting your other guests." Cyrros wagged a scolding finger at Reinhardt. "You shouldn't deny the rest of them your grand vision for the future of Nevarra."

He turned to Sidony and offered his arm, smiling. She folded her arms in response, and his smile widened into an unsettling grin.

"No?"

He pulled his arm away.

"Well, if you'd prefer, I can certainly let you get back to enjoying Lord Reinhardt's captivating opinions, but *someone* tells me you and I have business to discuss."

"My drink's gone anyway," Reinhardt grumbled as he took his leave.

Cyrros extended his arm again, and Sidony took it. The red stone in the ring Antonia gave her glinted in the crook.

They walked with purpose, pushing through the crowd at a brisker pace than the meandering strolls of the other guests. Their faces lit up as they saw Cyrros approach them; many nodded their regards, and a few even bowed.

Sidony glanced sidelong at his beaming face. He acknowledged each and every soul they passed with the knowing smile of kindred spirits sharing a secret. *What did he know about them? Anything at all? Were they just potential customers—or potential marks?*

"Are you allowed to call every noble in Nevarra by their first name? Or is there something special between you and Lord Reinhardt?" Sidony asked.

Cyrros chuckled as he saluted a woman with the tallest hair Sidony had ever seen. "I'm *allowed* to call anyone by any name I want," he said. "If I get it wrong, no one ever corrects me. They're afraid to."

People were intimidated by Sidony for many reasons—because she was an agent of the Inquisition, because she was a mage no longer chained to any Circle of Magi, because she was a woman far from what one would call approachable—but no one had ever been so scared that they couldn't correct her when she was wrong. This elf had power that made people who should fear nothing tremble in his presence.

"We shouldn't stay out in the open like this. There are lots of eager ears around. Besides mine," he said with a wink.

He steered them to an unoccupied alcove and planted himself in front of her, his back to the party, his hand against the wall, and his outstretched arm barring her from flight. To the guests outside, they would have looked like any other couple taking advantage of the alcove's privacy.

"I saw you earlier, at the window. You looked like you were waiting for someone," Cyrros said. "It couldn't have been Nicolas—you looked like you could hardly wait to snap your fingers and light his pompous ass on fire."

"And how would I do that?" Sidony replied, as flatly as possible.

"I'm certain a mage as skilled in necromancy as you could figure something out. Probably something even more imaginative than flame, I'm betting."

Sidony pursed her lips. *Antonia.*

Cyrros laughed. "I've worked with plenty of mages; the lot of you all have the same tells. There's a certain . . . *draw* that you all just haven't figured out how to hide."

"Have any of the mages you've 'worked with' been Mortalitasi?"

He narrowed his eyes. "I can't say I've had the pleasure, no. Not in the way I've worked with other mages. But I get an earful about them.

Almost daily.

"You heard Nicolas. Every fool in Nevarra has an opinion about the Mortalitasi. Half the people think they were sent by the Maker himself to save the kingdom from civil war; the other half will tell you all about their 'secret rituals' and 'mind-control experiments.'"

Sidony rolled her eyes. "Very interesting. But I'm . . . looking for a *particular* death mage."

Cyrros raised an eyebrow and waited. Sidony huffed.

"*Someone* in the Grand Necropolis wrote to me. He said . . . he made some very serious accusations against another Mortalitasi. Now he's dead. I need to know if someone is responsible for that."

"And what's stopping you from marching down into their lair and interrogating every one of them until you find what you're looking for? You strike me as a capable woman."

"I tried, but . . ." Henrik's twisted face flashed through her mind and the words died on her tongue. "It doesn't matter. Whoever did this has to be stopped."

"Stopped? From doing what?"

Sidony scoffed. She'd hoped to avoid telling him anything more than what she'd led Antonia to believe, but she needed options. And he wasn't one of *them;* if she played her cards right, she could tell him the truth without alerting the assassin that she was coming.

And maybe if he understood that the lives of the people who provided his employment were the ones at stake, he'd be more likely to help.

"One of them—a Mortalitasi—is planning to murder a noble."

Cyrros started to say something and stopped.

"Planning?" he asked. His mouth pressed into a line and his head ticked to the side. "I think you're too late to stop them. Several times over."

"What?" Sidony bit out, irritation spiraling inside of her.

"Four nobles dead. In the past week," Cyrros said as he crossed his arms. His jovial demeanor had faded, replaced by a stern and contemplative look.

The annoyance flooding through Sidony turned to anger. At every turn was a reminder of her failure to do her duty.

She narrowed her eyes at Cyrros and snapped, "And? What proof do you have that these nobles were killed by a Mortalitasi?"

"None," he replied unabashedly. "They died by"—he ticked each method off on his fingers—"a hunting mishap, two falls, and in one poor sod's case, too much wine. Deaths like that aren't exactly uncommon in wealthy Nevarran houses, and if the family *believes* it was an accident, the city guard won't investigate.

"But," he turned and looked out over the guests, to where Reinhardt was spilling something from his cup as he addressed an enraptured group of partygoers, "if these 'accidents' happen within days of each other, to nobles who are notorious for speaking out against the king's Mortalitasi advisors, and the Mortalitasi keep carting off the bodies before anyone can get a good look at them . . . it's hard not to take notice."

He faced her again. "And when a mage shows up on your doorstep, saying she's hunting a noble-killing Mortalitasi, it's hard not to get *suspicious*."

"And how are *you* so acquainted with the details of these deaths?"

Cyrros laughed. "Antonia told you who I am, didn't she? What I do? There isn't much I *don't* know. And when I *know* someone is targeting my clients . . . I won't sit and wait for it to happen again. Especially not when the Maker himself sends such a capable ally to help me—"

Before Sidony could answer, the sound reached her: a scream, just barely audible over the deafening sound of the party. Over and over, like someone having the life pulled from their body piece by piece.

Sidony shoved Cyrros out of the mouth of the alcove and tore into the crowd. She shouldered her way past the drunk and foolish guests stumbling around her, searching for the direction of the scream.

"Mage!"

Cyrros caught up to her just as she reached the landing of the grand staircase. He snatched her arm, turning her around to face him. "Was it something I said?"

"Stop it," she hissed, knocking his hand away from her. *"Listen."*

All around them, mouths began murmuring in ears; heads turned in all directions as others started to notice the sound. Gawkers leaned over the railings and pointed down to the floor below.

She turned and hurried down the steps, across the main hall, weaving in and out of the gaps left open by the huddling guests.

The screams turned into wails, bouncing from the walls of a dark corridor avoided by the guests. Sidony turned down the hall and saw her:

a young, terrified maid pulling at her own hair and howling into an open door. By the time she reached her, the girl had collapsed.

Sidony stepped over her crumpled body, her boots clicking on the polished marble as she peered into the room beyond. The lavishly furnished sitting room was dark and silent; there were no signs anyone had been here except for a sputtering flame in the fireplace, and the dead man facedown in the middle of the floor.

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"Poor Nicolas is absolutely beside himself."

Sidony closed her eyes against the sun's reflection on the water and sighed as they walked past another dock. "If I were forced to choose between eating that rat over there and being considerate of Nicolas Reinhardt's feelings, I would eat the rat."

"Come now." Cyrros laughed. "Have some sympathy! Someone was *murdered* in the man's home last night!"

"Exactly," Sidony spat. "You saw the body, the state it was in."

Something had been done to it, something that gave it the same sickly, twisted appearance as Henrik's corpse.

"And Reinhardt threw me out with the rest of the gawkers when I tried to get a closer look," she continued. "Forgive me if I cannot manage to harbor any kindness for him."

After Reinhardt had unceremoniously tossed out everyone from the party, the servants had ushered the discontented guests into the streets with the assurance that the death was merely an unfortunate bit of luck. *An accident—the same thing the families of the other victims were desperate for everyone to believe*.

"He does have appearances to keep up," Cyrros said, as if he could read her thoughts. "It will go badly for Nicolas if the most powerful people in Nevarra think he allows assassins to strike under his own nose. Better for them to believe old Lord Hildebrand simply overexerted himself with that maid, and let *his* house deal with the scandal."

"Last night, I couldn't get Reinhardt to shut up about the Mortalitasi. Now that his ego is involved, suddenly he has no interest in stopping them?"

"That's what these people do, mage." Cyrros fell into step beside her and cast her a sidelong glance.

"Before long, the throne of Nevarra will be free for the taking, and when every royal-blooded family from here to Cumberland thinks they have a chance at it, they'll do *anything* to increase their chances. Right now, being nobility in this kingdom means knowing everything that could bring down your rivals—but more importantly, it means controlling what your rivals know about *you*

"Besides, Nicolas runs his mouth so much about the Mortalitasi, he's bound to have a target painted on his back already. That target will get a lot bigger if he starts accusing one of them of murder. Best leave him to his delusions and let us figure out who's behind this. Starting with finding this ambitious little bastard who thinks he can get one over on my client."

The night before, Cyrros had found Sidony in the throng of party-goers as they filed out of the manor. He had pulled her away into the night, away from curious ears, and made an offer: In exchange for telling her what he could learn about the Mortalitasi assassin, she would help him secure their first lead on the killer.

Cyrros had a patron who had been the mistress of one of the recently slain nobles. Evidence of their affair—a journal—had fallen into the hands of the victim's servant, who was threatening to expose the scandal unless the patron paid him an unconscionable amount of gold.

They had spent the morning combing the docks by the river, searching the places Cyrros had heard the upstart servant liked to visit, without any luck. It was an unusually warm day for the season, and the sun hung high overhead as they sat on a low wall to rest.

"I . . . *appreciate* you helping me stop this assassin." Sidony sighed. "But I am having trouble understanding how cleaning up these foolish messes for your noble pets is a valuable use of my time."

"I told you," Cyrros smiled reassuringly, "my patron has information to trade, *if* we find the journal for her."

"I understand that part. But what could she possibly know that would be of any use to us?"

"So far, every victim's family has insisted that their deaths were accidental. Despite their questionable nature. I haven't been able to piece together whether they're saying this to avoid shame, or because someone is coercing them. Either way, none of them would dare risk putting themselves out of favor with the Mortalitasi by claiming one of them is responsible.

"My patron promised me that once she gets the journal, she'll tell us what she knows about the circumstances around her lover's fall. She doesn't believe the official story. She doesn't think it was an accident, or by her lover's own hand. I think she knows something that'll give us a better lead than just waiting for another party and using the nobles as bait."

Sidony looked out over the river. Her patience for the royal families' frivolities and squabbles was growing thin, so much so that using one of them as bait was starting to sound rather enticing.

"Who is this woman, your patron? How do you know we can trust her?"

Cyrros smiled again, the one that seemed to appear when he wanted her to stop asking questions.

"That's not part of *our* deal, *mage*. Just as I won't tell my patron the secrets you're after, I won't betray her trust by exposing her."

"Stop calling me 'mage,'" Sidony snapped. "Would you like me to call you 'frustratingly shifty elf'?"

"I guarantee you, I've been called worse things." Cyrros laughed.

"I know that this is all part of what you do," Sidony continued. "But the people I usually work with have the decency to not withhold knowledge from me. This blind confidence you expect is not something that is ever asked of me. I am not enjoying it."

"Ah, there he is," Cyrros said as he looked away and gestured to a young man walking past the market stalls across the plaza. His messy black hair stuck out of the hood of his coat, completely out of place in the warm weather.

Sidony scowled as he deflected her concerns.

"Perfect," he said as he stood and brushed off his pants and extended his hand to her. "I was going to suggest using your special brand of magic, but that face you're making will put the fear of the Maker into the poor boy. Let's go."

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They kept their distance as they followed him up the avenue.

Artists and various entertainers were still hard at work, preparing and adorning the dozens of statues for the season. Their quarry weaved in and out of buzzing crowds.

"What are we waiting for?" Sidony asked. "He's right there."

"Too many people around," Cyrros replied. "I want him in a quieter place. Don't want to risk anyone else getting involved. The journal we're after might get snatched up in the wrong hands. Again."

Silence settled between them as they walked. Sidony clasped her hands together and felt a foreign presence against her palm. She looked down and saw the angry red stone in the ring Antonia gave her the night before still blazing on her finger. In the chaos after Reinhardt had dismissed everyone from the party, she hadn't been able to find her.

"I have to ask," Cyrros began. "How do you know Lady Antonia?"

Sidony looked at him and sighed.

He put his hands up in defense.

"Can't help it. Part of the job and all."

"I *don't* know her," she replied.

"Interesting."

The upstart servant they were tailing was no longer staring straight ahead. He looked in several directions before slipping into a side street.

"This way," Cyrros said as he pulled her into the alley closest to them.

"We'll come out the other side and catch him off guard. He'll notice us if we follow him down directly."

They picked up their pace as they made their way through the deserted passageway.

"Do you often wear jewelry belonging to complete strangers?" Cyrros asked as he pointed to her hand. "Strangers who just so happen to be very prominent and influential necromancers?"

"And how are *you* so well acquainted with Antonia?"

"I don't know her personally, just the bits and pieces I've picked up through my work. She's very popular in many circles, very well liked."

Cyrros thought for a moment. "She seemed like a lively woman, when she pointed me your way last night. She was very concerned about you."

Sidony rolled her eyes. "She is . . . a friend of someone I knew. A long time ago. That is our only connection."

"Your only connection . . . other than the fact that you're both highly skilled death mages?"

Sidony shook her head. "I was supposed to be one of *them*. A Mortalitasi. Antonia's friend, Henrik, he . . . took me in when I was a

child. Taught me necromancy—death magic. The customs and history of Nevarra. Little else."

Sidony frowned as she remembered her days cooped up in the Necropolis, hungry to learn more about magic in the world outside, longing to see the rest of Thedas. And Henrik, telling her to put those thoughts from her mind, that Nevarra City itself was dangerous enough, let alone anywhere else.

"Henrik and Antonia always expected me to join them, eventually. But . . ."

"But?" Cyrros asked.

Sidony's patience spilled away like a tipped-over glass. "But obviously I *didn't*."

Cyrros opened his mouth, but before he could speak, Sidony hissed, "Because I'm *here* with *you*. Being pestered by annoying questions instead of catching a Mortalitasi assassin that keeps slipping through my fingers!"

Cyrros clamped his mouth shut and smiled. They fell into silence again, and soon they reached the other side of the alley.

"Wait." Cyrros barred her way with his arm and looked around the corner, in the direction of the alleyway where their target had disappeared.

"It's quiet enough here," he said, surveying the near-empty street. "If he comes this way, pull him in."

Time stretched as they waited for the servant to appear from the mouth of the other alley.

"So, Henrik. What happened to him—"

"Stop it," Sidony barked.

"Stop what?"

"I'm not one of the eager little rumormongers you like to trade with. Is *my past* relevant to finding this assassin? Will it help you win the silly games you're playing with the nobility? Stop asking me . . ."

The rest of her words fell away. Her eyes were drawn over Cyrros's shoulder, to another grossly exaggerated statue some thirty paces away. Some Pentaghast duke or another. Both its arms, raised in supplication, cast the street around it into shade, obscuring a motionless figure that radiated the same magic, the same cold impression of death that she had felt the night before.

Before she could will her feet to walk in its direction, she felt hands clamp on her shoulders and spin her around.

"There!" Cyrros hissed in her ear.

It was him, the servant they'd been chasing, walking away from them on the other side of the street.

Sidony wrenched herself from Cyrros's grip and bolted toward him. The servant had just enough time to realize a determined-looking woman was racing in his direction before Sidony thrust her hand forward. A purplish-white flash of magic narrowly missed his back as he started to run.

As she darted after him, she could faintly hear Cyrros shouting and the pounding of his footsteps behind her. If he wanted her to stop, then he was about to be disappointed. She would not let another piece of this puzzle elude her.

Before she could let another curse fly from her hand, the servant turned a sharp corner, into a narrow alley between two storefronts.

She heard a shout—Cyrros's voice—close behind her. She looked over her shoulder, and he gestured for her to follow the servant before he slipped into a narrow passage a dozen paces behind.

She raced into the alley. The servant was nearing the other side.

Gathering as much strength as she could, she stopped and focused on his retreating form. Just as Cyrros appeared in the opening at the opposite end of the alley, she sliced her left arm in an arc in front of her.

The servant screamed as the curse knocked him forward and out of the alley. His hands flew to his head, batting away imagined monsters from the horror spell Sidony had inflicted on him.

Cyrros caught him just as he began to collapse and dragged the screaming man back into the alley, and Sidony ran forward to meet him. The servant's face looked like Henrik's had when she saw his corpse: pulled wide in a look of terror.

"Stop his screaming," Cyrros ordered as he struggled to restrain their quarry. She pulled on her magic, attempting to wipe the spell from the man's mind. She tried again, and again, gritting her teeth against the energy draining from her body. But the more she tried, the louder he screamed, and the more she saw Henrik's face.

"Mage! Stop him!"

"I can't," Sidony growled, "it's not working."

The servant thrashed and forced his way out of Cyrros's arms. The man charged at Sidony, his shrieking face inches from hers, teeth gnashing and eyes wild. Suddenly, he was yanked backward by his hair, and his screams turned to gasps. Blood poured from his side, from the spot where the knife in Cyrros's hand was buried.

Cyrros released him, and the servant fell to the ground. Now that she could see him calm and up close, she realized he couldn't have seen more than twenty years. And now his death was another she had failed to prevent.

"What—" Sidony panted. "Why did you do that?"

"I told you to make him stop," Cyrros said, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and wiping at his hands. "If he'd kept it up, who knows what attention we would've drawn . . . especially after you decided to throw a few fistfuls of magic out in the open."

"I was—" Sidony stuttered. "I was about to—"

She waved her hand over the dead man covered in his own blood.

"*This* wasn't part of what you asked of me," she said forcefully. "*Why* did you do that?"

He said nothing as she watched him pull his knife from the corpse and clean it. She said nothing as he rummaged inside the servant's coat until he found the journal they were looking for. And silence stretched between them as he pushed her out of the alley, back into the sunny main street.

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"Wait here," Cyrros said as they stood outside the front door of an elegant apartment.

"No," Sidony said, snatching the journal from Cyrros's hand.

"I need to hear what this woman knows." She crushed the book to her chest. "I need to hear it from *her*. Not you."

Cyrros shook his head.

"You can't. She doesn't know you, she isn't expecting you . . ." He reached for the book.

She stepped back, out of his grasp. Clutching the journal with one hand, she held the other forward, open and palm up.

"Do you want to see for yourself what that boy saw before you cut open his ribs?" she warned.

He dropped his hand and sighed.

"Come on," he said, opening the door for her.

"After you," Sidony replied.

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The apartment was dark, despite it being the middle of the afternoon. The expected noise from servants and visitors in an extravagant place like this was absent.

No one appeared to greet them as they moved through the entryway.

"Are you sure this is where we were supposed to bring the journal?" Sidony asked.

"Yes," Cyrros said. "She told me to bring it here once I found it. She could be out for the afternoon, but the entire household wouldn't go with her. Something's wrong."

Sidony felt the prickle of magic ripple down her arm in response.

When they crossed into the room, the magic flared when she saw the body, all shriveled limbs and colorless skin.

Cyrros's face fell into a concerned frown.

"Well . . . damn," he said, smoothing a hand through his hair.

"What do you mean, damn?" Sidony said, more frantically than she would have liked.

Cyrros smirked. "Are you all right, mage? With your skill set, I didn't think seeing something like this would unnerve you."

"Don't tell me *this* is who we are depending on?"

"And if it is?" Cyrros asked before disappearing back into the front hall.

Sidony glared at the corpse, at this new proof of her failure. *Another witness silenced. One more step behind the killer.*

"I am growing *tired* of this assassin beating me at every turn," she said through gritted teeth when Cyrros returned to the parlor.

"They haven't beat us yet," Cyrros said. "This is your chance, mage."

"What are you talking about?" Sidony sneered.

"No one's here! No one to shoo us away, no one to tip off the Mortalitasi to come and take the body . . . We need death magic."

Sidony peered at the body, brow furrowed. "If I do what you're suggesting . . . it won't be pretty."

"It's death magic. I wouldn't expect it to be."

She shot him a glare.

"Can't you just . . . wake it up long enough to tell us what it saw?" Cyrros offered.

"That's not how it works. Getting a corpse to speak is a rare gift, even among the Mortalitasi."

"There has to be something you can try."

Sidony regarded him for a moment. The Mortalitasi's methods weren't supposed to be known to anyone outside the order, and the Maker only knew if she could even get this to work, but this could be their only opportunity to study one of the victims uninterrupted.

"I can call on a spirit from the Fade to possess the corpse. I've heard stories of spirits latching on to the final moments of the dead." She paused, thinking back to the old rituals Henrik used to make her observe.

"There are certain tools the Mortalitasi use to attract a spirit to a corpse, tools that I do not have. And if I do not use the proper methods to invite a spirit into the body, it will be . . . unpredictable. We can *hope* it's agreeable, but this thing will be just as likely to attack you as answer your questions."

"I don't think we have a choice right now," Cyrros reminded her.

Sidony let out a breath and closed her eyes. She focused her magic, using it to reach into the Fade—the realm beyond where spirits, demons, and departed souls reside. She searched for a spirit willing to occupy Cyrros's patron, if only for a brief moment; willing to confess her memories to them.

Cyrros shouted as the fingers on the corpse's gloved hand started to flex. Sidony centered herself and pulled the spirit harder toward the dead. She was a breath away from fully waking it, when she noticed the embroidery on the glove as it lifted in the air: a quill.

Pain exploded in the back of her skull, and everything went dark.

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"My wife, Cyrros? My *wife?*"

The anxious voice lanced through the haze that was slowly lifting from Sidony's head. She willed her eyes to open, but they wouldn't.

"Yes, your wife, Nicolas, and I'm sorry," came Cyrros's voice, and the rustle of clothing as one man shoved the other. "But if you don't take

your hands off me, you'll be joining her."

"Now you're threatening *me*?" Reinhardt laughed. "How stupid could I have been—"

"Pretty damn stupid if you think I was the one who did this."

"What would you have me believe?" Reinhardt roared. "I hired you to kill my rivals and take the Mortalitasi down with them, and now I find my *wife* slain by the assassin I employed—and one of the damn death mages herself!"

Sidony started at the confession and forced her eyes open. The room was unfamiliar, full of well-appointed furniture . . . But she recognized the same polished floor—red as a drakestone—as that of the room where they had discovered the body of Cyrros's patron. *Reinhardt's wife*.

She struggled to sit up and discovered her hands were bound behind her.

"Why would he have me raise your wife if he killed her?" Her voice sounded weaker than she would have liked.

The two men turned to Sidony in surprise. Reinhardt quickly recovered, and he rushed forward, an accusing finger outstretched toward her.

"Because he was using you, you disgusting witch! His job was to upend the Nevarran line of succession and blame it on people like *you!*"

Reinhardt rounded on Cyrros.

"And because he's a *killer*. That's all he knows how to do. Give him a list of targets, and he won't stop there. He can't control himself."

Sidony looked to Cyrros. He didn't deny it, but from the look on his face, he was struggling with something unspoken.

The right words to talk his way out of this.

She looked to the ground; her face grew hot at the idea that she had aided the very person she was sent to stop.

Nicolas laughed, a biting, taunting sound. "You didn't know, did you? Who did you think he was? Who did you think you were helping?"

A man who would kill a boy in broad daylight to silence him. A man with connections, with easy access to the victims and their families. A man who the most powerful people in Nevarra City both feared and admired.

The pain in her head was unbearable, but Sidony pushed it away and concentrated.

"Was it not enough for you that I paid the debt you owed to your previous employers? That I saved you from their incessant pursuit? What

else could you possibly desire?" Reinhardt asked, his ire fully on Cyrros again.

"Nicolas, I need you to shut up and let me explain."

"Do you know what this is going to do to my standing in the court? After I've dragged myself forward, you've knocked me even further from the throne!"

Their shouting was distracting, and Sidony screwed her eyes shut against the sound. She reached out with her magic, trying with everything she had to finish the spell Reinhardt had interrupted. A moment later, she felt it: a response from the room where they had found Reinhardt's wife.

"Maker help you, Nicolas, if you don't quiet yourself—"

She could sense it leaving the room where they had discovered it, moving down the hall, toward the parlor . . .

"No, we're done, Cyrros. If I have to throw you to the wolves along with the Mortalitasi, then I will—"

It was outside the door, and Sidony beckoned it inside.

"I didn't kill your wife or the other bastards you hired me to kill either. Someone else got to all of them first, Nicolas! Someone who obviously knows what you're planning. The mage and I were trying to find out who—"

Cyrros cried out in surprise as Nicolas's scream echoed around the room, but neither of the men managed to drown out the sickening crunch of nails and teeth sinking into flesh.

Sidony's eyes flew open, just in time to see the corpse of Reinhardt's wife attack her husband. Lord Reinhardt howled in pain and confusion, his arms uselessly pulling at her rabid form, blood pouring from every gash his dead wife opened upon his body.

Cyrros's knife flew into his hand, and he quickly backed into the wall.

Reinhardt's screams disappeared almost as soon as they began. His lifeless body crumpled, and the former Lady Reinhardt spun toward Cyrros.

His eyes darted to Sidony.

"Tell me." Sidony pulled herself up uneasily. "How many dead nobles did you hope to lay at the Mortalitasi's feet? At *my* feet? How many other necromancers did you plan to use? It must have felt like the Maker himself smiled upon you last night, when he put *two* death mages right in your way."

Lady Reinhardt took a step forward.

"I'm telling the truth, mage. I didn't do this." He gestured toward the walking corpse. "Any of it."

His knuckles turned white around the hilt of his knife.

"But the Maker is smiling on *me* now. I was looking for an assassin," Sidony said. She jerked her head toward Lady Reinhardt's corpse, and it collapsed in a heap on the floor. Purplish-white fire erupted in Sidony's open palm.

"And I found one."

"Mage! Stop!" Cyrros stepped away from the wall, and rushed toward her.

"My name is not *Mage!*"

She thrust her arm forward, tearing away her bonds, flinging the siphoning spell and hitting him square in the chest. The skin on his extremities turned dark purple, then black, as the curse drained the very life from his body.

***

She waited until night had completely fallen before she left the apartment. None of the staff ever returned, so she sat inside with the corpses, until she was sure she could escape the house without drawing outside attention.

Under the cover of the moonless autumn night, she slipped out the back door, without notice.

Except for the shadowy figure—still as death, its necrotic aura chilling her to the bone—waiting at the end of the street. Watching.

I am going to have an interesting report for Pentaghast, she thought, as she turned and walked the opposite way.

***

Henrik's body had been moved to the tomb that had waited for him since he joined the Mortalitasi order. Despite the horrific appearance of his mangled corpse, he seemed almost comfortable in the tableau the other death mages had arranged for him: sitting at a desk, surrounded by books on necromancy. Alone.

He had been wrong about a Mortalitasi planning to assassinate the nobles—another victim of Cyrros's network of well-placed rumors and gossip—and she resented him for using that mistake to drag her back to the city that she hated, to protect people that she despised. But buried deep below the resentment, she knew that he had called on her for help because he still trusted her, after all this time. Even after she abandoned him.

And she had failed to protect him, even after the many years he had kept her hidden away from the vicious games the rest of Nevarra was playing outside the halls of the Necropolis.

She had begrudged his insistence that she join the Mortalitasi, *hated* his resistance to learning anything about the world outside Nevarra City, but she never wanted this for him. Before she returned to the Inquisition (and did everything in her power to never see Nevarra City again) the least she could do was ensure he had reached his resting place.

When she returned to the Necropolis, she hadn't expected the other Mortalitasi to accept her apology for her previous behavior, but she was grateful when they did. To her surprise, one of the death mages, an older man with silver hair and a mustache, had happily escorted her to Henrik's tomb.

"I heard you came to say goodbye to dear Henrik," a bright voice rang out behind her.

"No," Sidony said, turning to face Antonia as she entered the tomb. "I am just . . . making sure he's where he wanted to be."

"Oh." The corner of Antonia's lips quirked upward. "For a moment, I thought there might actually be some warm, sentimental feelings in there —" Antonia pointed to the center of Sidony's chest.

Sidony hummed a response. She would soon be free of the woman's gibes.

"Since you're leaving us—again—I take it Cyrros helped you find what you were looking for?" Antonia asked.

"He did," Sidony replied. *As far as you know.*

Antonia smiled.

"You did good work."

Sidony raised a brow.

"Killing Lord Reinhardt and his pet assassin." Antonia smiled. "They would have brought chaos upon the kingdom if they had been allowed to see their plan through."

Sidony clenched her jaw.

"Forgive me," she began, "but why did you say you knew about Reinhardt and Cyrros? That is information I have not even reported to the Inquisition yet."

Antonia carried on as if Sidony had never spoken.

"These nobles . . . responsible for guiding the country, and this is the example they set? To grow so desperate for power that they resort to climbing over each other's corpses to reach the throne?

"So many people tell me they're ready for change, for the kingdom to be taken in a new direction, without the uncertainty of the old royal blood and their constant struggles for control. With the line of succession in such disarray, maybe it's time for the Mortalitasi to intervene . . ."

A stabbing cold ripped through Sidony, a chill that had nothing to do with her surroundings.

"I told you before, Sidony. The people of Nevarra, noble and common, know our worth. They see the value in counsel given by a Mortalitasi. Why, I could tell them the Maker himself willed their daughter to jump from a window, and they would believe me. They would find peace in that. I could say that there's no point in examining the crate of wine that killed their brother for poison, and they would trust in my wisdom."

She pointed a finger toward Henrik.

"If I say this doddering old recluse is dead because he's grown too fond of drinking during his experiments, no one will question me."

She turned back to Sidony.

"And when I send a bitter, unpleasant girl to get a two-bit assassin and his upstart master out of my way, she will take them down for me. She will destroy them, without even a second thought, and show the rest of Nevarra just how far the nobility is willing to go for power."

The chill seeped deeper into Sidony's bones. The weight of Antonia's words hung heavy in the silence.

A tranquil smile illuminated Antonia's face, and her eyes glanced to Sidony's hand.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "My ring. You still have it."

Her hand extended toward Sidony.

Eyes never leaving Antonia's, Sidony pulled the trinket from her finger. As she dropped the ring into her waiting palm, she felt it: the

waves of death and decay, of a cold void, emanating from the dark figure she'd come to recognize, standing in the corner.

"You know," Antonia said, following Sidony's gaze to the corpse. "When I learned that Henrik had sent for you, I was furious. The last thing I needed was a thorn in my side in the form of a churlish little deserter who abandoned the Mortalitasi.

"But you turned out to be useful after all," she said with the same calm smile.

Antonia retreated from the tomb. The corpse that had haunted Sidony at every turn, cataloging her every move, dutifully followed its mistress into the dark.

Alone in the tomb, Sidony froze under the watch of Henrik's lifeless body. The man who had taught her everything she knew, whom she had rebelled against for years, stared vacantly at her from his resting place.

Cyrros had used her. Even if he had never gotten the opportunity to pin the deaths of the nobles on her, he had still managed to run her ragged across Nevarra City, chasing a killer who was sabotaging his work and tarnishing his reputation. Rage flared within her as she thought of killing Cyrros and Nicolas; she thought she'd been preventing a political catastrophe on behalf of the Inquisition, but she had been nothing more than Antonia's pawn.

Even Pentaghast—in her own way—had used Sidony. Did it matter to her that Sidony wanted nothing to do with the fate of her home country?

The Inquisitor does not want to see that happen to Nevarra.

Or did it only matter that the Inquisitor was pleased?

She met Henrik's blank, twisted expression. He had never been what she wanted or even what she thought she needed. For most of her life, he had felt like a jailor instead of a father, or even a teacher. He had insisted she stay hidden away from the world, discouraged her from learning anything outside the lessons of death magic. But he had never used her.

And now she'd give anything to hear what he had to say.

She could go to the other Mortalitasi, tell them what Antonia had done; but her standing with them was still precarious at best. It would be her word against that of a prominent Mortalitasi, one who could accuse an agent of the Inquisition of murdering a Nevarran lord without question. A situation Antonia would no doubt use to her benefit.

And if Sidony *removed* Antonia from her own game, whose pawn would she become then? Who would be waiting in the wings to fill Antonia's place? In Nevarra, there would always be another waiting to climb over the ones who fell.

The silence of Henrik's tomb was suffocating, as the dead man's stare became unbearable.

It didn't matter if anyone else benefited from what happened to Antonia. Sidony couldn't take failing him again.

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The statues came alive that night. Countless points of light from candles at their bases and in the hands of revelers illuminated every crevice in every stone face, every wrinkle in the fabric draped around the stone bodies, every flower scattered at their feet.

The autumn pageant all of Nevarra City had been preparing for was here, and every one of the city's residents filled the streets with laughter and dancing. The crowds were perfect for concealing Sidony as she walked the boulevard, but they made it almost impossible to find who she was looking for.

But predictably, the brassy-haired, bright-faced death mage shone like a beacon, even among the masses. She was surrounded by admirers looking for counsel, for guidance, for just a smile, all of which Antonia freely gave.

Sidony watched as the little girl she had given a stack of gold to approached Antonia, the letter Sidony had given her outstretched in her little hand. Antonia beamed, and when she took it, the girl ran in the opposite direction.

The smile faded as Antonia read the crumpled parchment.

What was she feeling as she read the words from Henrik's hand, the hand Sidony had easily reawakened for this purpose? Was it confusion? Fear?

For the first time, Sidony saw Antonia's face darken. She excused herself from her enchanted audience and looked around, but Sidony's face effortlessly blended into the crowd.

Antonia turned and disappeared between two statues standing guard at the mouth of an abandoned back street, and Sidony followed.

The darkness in the alleyway would mask the two mages from outside eyes, and the noise of the crowds would drown out Antonia's screams.

And in the time it would take for someone to discover the Mortalitasi's body, Sidony would be too far from Nevarra City to hear *their* screams.

They had met in an alley, and in an alley, they would part.

THE STREETS OF MINRATHOUS

BRIANNE BATTYE

The streets of Minrathous are never truly deserted, but they do a decent impression of it after midnight. Not that it calmed Quentin Calla's nerves. He scurried down the quiet alley, head on a swivel as if afraid he was being followed.

I was following him, but I wasn't the reason he was spooked. The man didn't know I was there. I let him get a good ways down the alley before tailing after.

Quentin's uncle, Otho Calla, was worried his nephew had fallen back in with the Venatori. The cult had lost its bite after their would-be god was struck down by the "glorious" Inquisitor. After that, a good number of cultists—who never admitted they were Venatori in the first place—distanced themselves from the whole affair. Of course, that didn't stop remaining loyalists from acting delusional and stirring up trouble when the mood struck. That's fanatics for you.

Quentin paused halfway down the alley and started muttering to himself. His left hand closed around a gold chain at his neck. I channeled a bit of magic, ready for whatever he planned to do, then let it fade back. He was giving himself a pep talk. This wasn't his part of the city.

Quentin's parents had disowned him years ago. Otho thought Quentin was up to something—something more than spouting cult

mantras. He wanted to know if he'd been a fool to give Quentin a second chance. But going to the "proper" authorities draws attention—and what if he was wrong? He'd face scandal for nothing. Otho needed information. That's where I came in. I don't work with people in Calla's circle often, but I couldn't argue with the offer. If Quentin's uncle was wrong, I'd save him the embarrassment of Minrathous gossip. If he was right, my information would give him enough time to play martyr and bribe the right people for a quiet arrest. The way I saw it, I was getting a controlling uncle off Quentin's back or a dangerous Venatori off my streets. Either way worked for me.

Pep talk over, Quentin walked into the open. The alley led to the docks. Quentin made his way to one of the storehouses—a brown brick building no different than its neighbors—throwing nervous looks left and right. It was a wonder I hadn't seen him robbed on the way here. I moved to stand in the shadow cast by a stack of wooden shipping crates. The night air was warm and I could hear the slap of water on rock. I flexed my fingers, pulling a stream of cold air into being. A light mist formed—nothing too showy, but enough to cover my position. Quentin may not have been observant, but I wasn't taking chances. I watched him pull a pouch from his pocket and sprinkle the contents over a brazier. The flames sputtered and turned pale blue. A signal.

A figure in white and beige robes approached from the shadows. Unlike Quentin, they were unbothered by the docks or the late hour.

"You're here," Quentin said, with the relief of a man who rarely sees things go right. "You'll tell the others—"

But I'll never know what Quentin thought the "others" should hear.

The figure that stepped into the light wore a full-face mask of polished bronze.

"Who—?" Quentin started.

Then the dagger was lodged in his neck.

I hadn't seen it coming.

Quentin was down, the figure crouched over his body. I felt a sudden unease, that low drop in the stomach when blood magic's in the air. The ground below us trembled and I grabbed the crates, adjusting my stance for balance. Then, as quick as it started, the shaking stopped.

There wasn't time to think. I stepped from behind the crates and began weaving a spell to hold the figure in place. Their limbs began to

slow as my magic took hold and for a second, I let myself think I had them.

But their hands were wet with Quentin's blood.

The figure's fists snapped shut as they drew on Quentin's vitals to push back. The speed and force of my spell collapsing staggered me. I pulled myself up, ready to counter their next attack, but that's not what I got.

The figure was already running down the docks. I flung out an arm, attempting to slow their escape, but I was still off guard and the magic went wide. My one leg may be dwarven-crafted metal below the knee, but that doesn't keep me out of a chase. I was prepared to follow, but Quentin groaned.

A glance in his direction was all it took. When I looked back, the masked figure had gotten away.

Quentin had gotten away from me, too. There was too much blood, and too much had already sunk into the cobblestones. I knelt beside him and hovered a hand near the dagger at his neck. I noticed the gold chain was gone. The figure must have taken it. His eyes widened as the chill of my magic slowed his bleeding. I couldn't stop it, but I could numb the pain—and let him talk a little longer.

"What happened?" I asked. "What were you doing here?"

"I was out," he managed. "How did you . . . ?"

"Your uncle," I said. It was enough for him to get the idea.

"I'm not Venatori," he said. Then again, as if he cared what I thought: "I was going to . . . I'm not with them."

"Sure," I said.

He reached up and grabbed my sleeve with more strength than I thought he had left. "It's almost the Hour," Quentin said. The words sounded forced, as if they pained him more than the knife. His hand sank back.

"What hour?" I asked, but he didn't say.

"I wasn't with . . . anymore. I'm sorry. Who . . . ?" He knew what came next. He was searching for whatever company he had left.

"Neve," I said.

My name was the last thing he heard.

***

What remained of the night didn't pick up from there.

After Quentin left me, I quickly searched the nearby alleys. I'd no hope the masked figure had stuck around, but I found an elf asleep under a tar-stained coat. I nudged him gently, but he jumped out of his skin all the same, muttering that the boss let him sleep there, then falling silent at the sight of Quentin's blood on my clothes. He'd seen nothing, of course, but he'd get word to the templars for some coin and a promise he wouldn't be in trouble. I returned home for a change of clothes and not enough rest, before heading to Otho Calla's manor—a residence nowhere near the third-rate bookseller where I rent a room.

From what I'd known of Quentin Calla, he'd been a grateful and devoted nephew. Quiet most of the time, but loud when it came to Minrathous's antislavery movement. A man putting the mistakes of his past behind him and trying to be better. So what had happened?

Otho Calla didn't care.

The man was taking breakfast by the time I turned up at his ornately carved door. He greeted me with a dismissive "young lady" that made me think he'd forgotten my name.

No matter what Quentin said in the end, his meeting with the robed figure was enough for Otho. Quentin was up to "something unsavory"—whether it was with the Venatori or not—and he'd wash his hands of it now. As far as Otho was concerned my work was done, and he didn't know or want to know about people in bronze masks. I left Otho staring out the window of an overlarge sitting room. The templars knew about the attack. This was their job now and I could let them have it. I'm sure Quentin's uncle sent coin right after, telling the templars to keep the Calla name out of it.

A bad night had turned into a bad morning, so I shouldn't have been surprised when the templars turned up. Or that they'd be more than the usual annoyance.

Minrathous isn't like the south, where templars control mages. Tevinter loves its mages—especially in Minrathous. Here, templars only act when magic's used outside the law—except in special cases when the mage-based justicars step in. Or when the right bribe makes a case "special" to them. If a job doesn't need justicar attention—or they want to consult a mage without being walked over—the templars hire outside assistance. It's a job I'd taken a few times before finding more than a few

jobs of my own. Working on my own doesn't pay as well as the templars, but I prefer it that way.

Knight-Templar Rana Savas's armor was shined like prized silverware and her dark hair wouldn't dare escape its perfect braid. She caught up to me outside my room just as I was returning home for the second time that morning.

"I told your knight-captain, I'm not looking for templar work."

"Quentin Calla died last night," Rana said.

"Funny, I heard that, too. In fact, I believe I sent your people word of it."

"There's whispers he was Venatori. If that's true, he's not the only dead cultist this morning. Lady Varantus . . ."

Don't say murdered.

"Murdered," she said.

Two in one night. I repressed a sigh, thinking of the sleep waiting for me inside, and leaned against the door. "Someone's after Venatori."

"It could be . . ." Rana began, but what was the point?

"It's not a coincidence," I said.

"No," Rana agreed. "A person in a bronze mask was seen in the street. The timing works out."

I'd gone looking for the truth about one man. One man, I could handle. I hadn't gone looking for conspiracies. Then again, I'd gone looking for possible Venatori—what did I expect?

"Knight-Captain Jahvis would like your opinion on any similarities between Calla and Lady Varantus," Rana said. She sounded official but looked as happy to invite me along as I was to work with the templars.

I smiled. "You don't think I'll help?"

"From what I heard, you watched the murderer run away," she said.

I adjusted the cuffs of my coat. "People walk from worse crimes in Minrathous."

"You're not under orders."

I could have let it go. The job had been simple: find out what Quentin Calla was doing. According to his uncle, I had an answer—or enough of one. But I'd watched the murderer run. I'd watched Quentin die and I didn't know the reason for it. It wasn't the most satisfying ending. And it wasn't one I wanted to live with.

"After you," I said.

***

If you want to know where the money is in Minrathous, look to the oldest mage families.

Lady Varantus came from an old family. The floor-to-ceiling windows in her personal study were covered in Orlesian silk. A large marble snake with gold-plated eyes sat coiled in the entrance. The chandelier overhead was excessive—and far too heavy to hang naturally. It's the sort of enchantment you expect in these old houses. The sort meant to impress while everyone ignores that someone's great-grandfather used blood magic to put it there.

The lady herself lay facedown in front of a finely carved desk in the center of the room. Scrolls, inkwells, and a small onyx bookend were thrown across the floor. Char marks on the door frame and acidic gouges in the desk suggested a struggle between mages. But there was also a deep gash in Lady Varantus's neck.

Rana snapped a salute as we entered. Knight-Captain Jahvis stood on the other side of the desk, all patched-up armor and sleep-deprived glares in front of an expensive marble fireplace. I sympathized. My family has more templars than mages. I'm sure that says a lot about me. The point is, I'm not from an old family and I felt as at home in Lady Varantus's house as Jahvis looked.

"You're bothering to help," Jahvis said. And there went the sympathy.

"You wouldn't ask if you didn't need it," I said sweetly.

Jahvis chose to move on. "We suspected Lady Varantus was Venatori for years. Knew she was up to *something* while their 'god' was running around, but we couldn't get close. Got proof now, for all the good it does." Then, to another templar with massive arms and a smack of freckles, he said: "Brom, read the stuff, don't just toss it around."

Brom let out a sigh and continued sifting through Lady Varantus's personal correspondence.

"I'd heard of her," I said, moving to stand next to the woman in question. "Lady Varantus. People said she'd become charitable the last few years."

"Who knows why the Venatori do anything?" Brom muttered, adding a lace-adorned wedding invitation to the unsteady pile.

The polished floorboards beneath Lady Varantus's body were stained black. "Quentin Calla was stabbed, too," I said.

"The attacker was a mage. Why get that close?" Jahvis asked, moving from the desk for another look at the body.

"Maybe she didn't give them a choice. Maybe they wanted to catch her by surprise," I suggested. "Or maybe they needed to."

"Blood magic?" Rana asked, and all three templars looked to me.

Blood magic has a nasty habit of thinning the Veil between our world and the Fade. I closed my eyes and reached for a small amount of magic, sensing how it would react. It came too readily, flowing too fast from the other side. The Veil in Lady Varantus's house was thin. Some places are just like that. For this to be one of them would have been too convenient.

"Yes, but why here?" I gestured vaguely to our rich if battle-scarred surroundings. "If the killer needs blood alone, there are less obvious sources than Lady Varantus. If they want Venatori—what ritual are they performing with them?"

"Nothing good," Jahvis said. "Our best guess is still an anti-cult crusader. Using blood magic against them could be their form of punishment."

"If someone's killing Venatori, that's fewer problems for us," Brom said.

"It's not against the law to be a cultist," Jahvis said.

"Depends what you do with it," Brom muttered.

"Sacrificing people is," Jahvis continued. Brom barely hid the scoff, but he didn't talk back.

"Whoever they're after, this mage thinks they can get away with murder," Rana said. "And that we're useless."

I bit the urge to say, *Aren't you?* I looked at Lady Varantus. Her hair had half fallen from an elaborate bun, but the back of her pale neck was visible. A thin line of bruising arced across the exposed skin, suggesting a fine chain once sat there—one that had been forcibly removed. I bet Quentin Calla had the same marks.

"So, they're a thief," Brom said when I pointed it out.

Rana picked up a heavy coin purse and tossed it at Brom. "Nothing else was taken."

"I'll ask around," I said. "If I find anything, I'll let you know."

Jahvis looked unimpressed. "I thought you weren't interested in templar work."

"Oh, I'm not," I said. "I'm finishing the work *I* started."

To punctuate the day I was having, a cold drizzle met me at the door. I watched my footing as I made my way down Lady Varantus's front stairs. The telltale tapping of rain on metal sounded as Rana followed me outside.

"We have known contacts and relatives of Lady Varantus—"

"I'm sure you do," I said. "And good luck getting anything from them."

"It's standard practice to start there," Rana said.

"'Standard practice' isn't my top concern. You're stunned, I know."

"Is that why you don't like working with templars?" Rana asked, a hint of triumph in her voice as if she'd caught me at something.

"No," I said casually. "That's not why."

Her brow furrowed, and a light scowl touched her lips. She wasn't ready to drop it just yet. "Do you have anything more on Calla?"

I smiled. "I'll find something."

***

If the world was fair, I would have found something right away to prove a point. But I spent the rest of the day speaking to dockworkers who'd heard the Calla name, of course, but didn't know Quentin himself. If someone was seeking Venatori jewelry, the best fence this end of the Imperial Highway hadn't heard of it. If someone in a bronze mask had been lurking around, the night guard hadn't seen them. He hadn't seen me or Quentin either, so I shouldn't have been surprised there.

As I was returning from the docks, I saw a Venatori street-prophet on the corner. His robes were clean, if faded, his hair neatly combed. He paced back and forth, trying and failing to make eye contact with the people walking by. He held a piece of paper in his hand that no one took.

"Tevinter was glorious," he said. "Look at Minrathous now—are we content? Our god would see us lifted. We can still do so. Corypheus's machinations live on in us . . ."

The prophet raised his voice over the noise—the grunts and curses of sweat-soaked laborers hauling goods from the docks, the impatient chatter of errand runners, food sellers pushing fried dough, the sharp rattle of coin against metal as a man in stained soldier's clothes tried for sympathy. No one looked at the soldier. No one looked at the prophet either, although maybe more liked his ideas than were willing to admit.

Even I want a better Minrathous. But the Venatori? The cult's dead god wanted to bring Tevinter back to what it was—to its "glory." It was nonsense, of course. It always was. The old empire was even more corrupt and heartless than what it is now, no matter how pretty the picture Corypheus painted. As the prophet continued his speech, I wondered what had made Quentin and Lady Varantus a target and not him. It seemed a necklace had marked them as victims, but what made the jewelry special—and why did they both have one in the first place?

I needed answers and I was running out of ideas. Even my best source of information, Elek Tavor, didn't have much. The man was a con artist I'd turned in the year before. To be fair, he'd nearly gotten me killed the year before that, so we were even.

"There's not much to say," Elek said when I met him at the Lamplighter at sunset, a tavern three streets too far to be in a nicer part of the city. A place known for the bronze lanterns over its tables and the tight lips of its barkeep. The silent dwarf smacked a pair of drinks in front of us before being hailed by a group of dirt-smeared men who "needed a drink before they were caught at it." A couple with Antivan accents continued a whispered conversation in the corner.

"I don't know who Calla thought he was meeting at the docks," Elek continued, "but I know why. He turned up a few times, asking about false papers, places to buy horses or hire a boat with no one noticing. That sort of thing."

"For how many?"

"Just one."

I slid a few coins across the table. "Stay out of trouble, Elek."

Elek tossed one of the coins back. "Wasn't worth that much. Supper's on me."

I took the coin to the best place at any hour: a tiny stall in the lower market run by a man named Halos.

"You," barked Halos as I approached, dropping a piece of fish into the sizzling oil without asking. He held out a hand for payment. "This fish won't eat itself."

"Then you're lucky I'm here."

"You'd starve without me." Halos wiped his hands on an oil-spotted apron and handed me the food—salty, piping hot, and perfect as always. He turned to the next person in line and began frying up another piece of fish.

I ate as I walked, my mind stuck on the day and the night before. Elek hadn't told me much, but what he'd said bothered me. Quentin had been trying to get a single person out of the city. It might have been connected to the antislavery movement . . . or it may have been for himself. Quentin hadn't been caught by surprise—not entirely. He'd expected *someone* at the docks; he'd wanted to leave a message with "the others." The way he'd toyed at the chain around his neck . . . he'd known something was coming. Had Lady Varantus known, too? From the look of her study, she'd put up a fight. Had the two spoken beforehand? Had something else warned them?

"Neve Gallus." The voice was low and urgent. The shadowed streets were starting to empty, but still bustled with people heading home for the day and those who didn't plan on going home at all. I turned, trying to pinpoint the source of the voice, and caught sight of a man staring at me from a tired shrine to Razikale. The statue's features were worn away at the feet, and the tip of one outstretched wing was chipped. The man gave a nervous jerk of his head before ducking back into the dragon's shadow.

"Neve Gallus," the man said again as I followed him behind the shrine. His eyes were bloodshot and he didn't know how to hold his arms, crossing and uncrossing them again. His robes were well-made with gold threading at the cuffs. The silver egret pin at his throat bobbed and shook as much as he did.

"You've been asking after Quentin Calla," he said. "You've seen Lady Varantus as well."

"Do you know something?"

The sound he made was more a yelp than a laugh. "They're dead."

"Well, aren't you insightful?" When the man didn't respond, I made to go. "If we've exhausted your knowledge, I'd like to finish my supper. If I'm lucky, maybe get a good night's sleep when I'm done."

"The Hour's coming," he choked out. Then gave another yelping laugh.

I could hear Quentin's voice echoed in his words, smell the blood pooled on wet cobblestones. He had my attention. "What's the Hour? What do you know?"

The man shook his head. "Paxus was killed last week. No one noticed that one. Well, almost no one."

"This Paxus. Venatori?" I asked.

"Yes."

The night before, Quentin Calla had been my only problem. The day had brought templars and Lady Varantus. Now I had this strange man and another dead cultist.

One problem at a time. That's how I preferred it. I may have been better off walking away.

"Do you want to know what Aelia took?" He'd changed tacks again, this time emphasizing the new direction by shoving a round clay disc into my hands, although he kept hold of the chain attached to it.

"Aelia's the one who killed them?"

The man nodded. "They all had one. You can keep it. If it helps you, all the better."

I tugged on the chain, but despite his words the man didn't want to let go.

"What is this?" I pressed. "What is the Hour?"

People can surprise you. In Minrathous, those surprises tend more toward *Surprise—your aunt's a blood mage* than *I brought you flowers*. The man trembling in Razikale's shadow surprised me by summoning an arcane flash of light instead of an answer.

I cursed more at myself than at him. By the time I could see, the man was gone and the remains of my fried fish lay on the ground. My stomach and head argued over which was more upsetting.

He'd left me the necklace. The clay seal fit in the palm of my hand and was seated in a polished black shell attached to a gold chain. A long, thin dragon with four wings was etched on the front, rising from a dark sea. I'd run into the Venatori before, but never seen anything like this. I could sense an enchantment on the thing but couldn't tell what it was for. Whatever it was, Quentin Calla had died for it. So had Lady Varantus. And Paxus, whoever he was. It was more than I'd known that morning and at the same time it meant nothing. I still didn't know why.

***

I tracked Rana down outside templar quarters the next morning. I could count the hours of sleep I'd had over the last two days on one hand, but I'd said I'd tell the templars if I found anything, and here I was.

"You have something," Rana said without preamble.

"Good morning, Knight-Templar Savas." I handed her the necklace. "I don't know what this means, but whoever's after the Venatori, they want these ones in particular."

"A specific chapter in the cult?" Rana wondered. It had been my first thought, too.

"Maybe they wronged our killer," I suggested.

Rana ran a thumb over the four-winged dragon. "I've seen this."

"What—where?"

"Carved in the corner of Lady Varantus's mantelpiece. We need to go back. Now that we know what to look for we might find what it means," Rana said with more can-do attitude than I thought templars were allowed.

And I was right.

"The matter with Lady Varantus is resolved and our presence is no longer required." Knight-Captain Jahvis's delivery said what he thought of the words even as he quoted them. We were crammed into the room he'd been given in the jet stone building next to the Circle of Magi. The tight quarters weren't cheering anyone's mood.

"But we have something—" Rana said.

"The Varantus family is grateful to the templars for stepping in and sorry their mother took her own life. They'll handle arrangements from here," Jahvis continued his quotation. Behind him, Brom let out a derisive snort.

"Took her own life?" Rana protested. "The spell marks, the signs of struggle . . ."

"Historical damage or their mother's final madness—take your pick," Jahvis said. "The Varantus family apologizes."

"Etcetera, etcetera," Brom added.

"The Varantus family is scared you'll find more Venatori among them." I said mildly. This is Minrathous—none of this was surprising.

"You know that, I know that. They're also friends with a justicar. He's stepped in personally. With the knight-commander's full support," Jahvis said.

"If we go to them with this . . ." Rana pointed at the necklace.

"And only that?" Jahvis said. "The Varantus family will bury it."

"Or your knight-commander will for them," I murmured.

"Savas, you have orders," Jahvis said, then turned to me. "Neve—don't push the Varantus family. I'm working on it, but we need another way

around."

I held up my hands in a show of innocence and left the templars to their cramped office. I crossed back over the worn hallways, through the front door, and into the noise and hurry of the Circle district. Magisters and scholars rushed to and from the looming tower, a string of flustered aides and apprentices trailing behind them.

For the second time in two days, I'd been given an excuse to stop. If I'd walked away, no one would have cared. Let's be honest, no one would have noticed in the first place. I could've gone home. But I didn't.

"Neve—where are you going?" Rana asked.

"It's very polite, but you don't need to walk me out every time," I said.

"Neve," Rana repeated.

"Nowhere near the Varantus family," I said. "That's your problem. I'm still looking into Calla." I pointed at the necklace. "And this is still useful."

"And the killer's still a mage," Rana said. "That makes him our responsibility. We should be the ones looking into that. The knight-captain said to wait."

"If I remember right, I'm not under orders."

"By right, I can seize that," Rana said.

"Or, we could consider it yours now and I can promise to return it when I'm done?"

Rana didn't look happy, but she didn't argue either. I tucked the necklace into a pouch at my waist. Rana went back inside and followed orders.

***

There's a shop down a side street off the lower market. At night, the entire narrow stretch is only lit by a few braziers, and even during the day it's dim. Not that anyone goes there during the day. The shop itself doesn't unbolt the doors until past noon. And for the man who looks at objects you don't want people to know about, you need to come later than that.

"What do you have?" the man asked before I could say what I wanted. I didn't know his name. If he knew mine, he pretended not to.

"Maybe I'm looking for something," I said.

The man raised an eyebrow. "Not the right look. What do you have?"

I placed the necklace on the scarred wooden table. The man scooped it up. I could feel his magic reaching to unlock the nature of the four-winged dragon's enchantment.

"Blood magic," he said.

"Yes, I gathered that."

"No, not like this. Not since Corypheus . . ."

"What does—?" But I didn't get to finish the question.

"Get out," he said, slamming the seal back to the table and shoving it toward me.

"Wait. What is—?" I tried again, but he wasn't having it.

"I don't know, I don't care, I never saw it."

A moment later I was back on the street. The man in the shop had seen a lot of things—worse than I could imagine, I'm sure—but this had him scared. And if he was afraid to talk, who else would? I was running out of options. There was one other person who knew about the necklace. The question was, could I track him down in time?

When I turned down the narrow street that led from the shop to the lower market, the figure in the bronze mask was waiting for me.

On instinct I fired off a blast of ice, but of course they'd been expecting me.

The figure dodged sideways, avoiding the attack, and charged forward. Drawing a dagger, they ducked low and swiped at me with the long blade. The steel glanced off my metal calf and the figure spun away. I could thank dwarven craftsmanship for the lack of damage, but it was a lucky-enough miss for me and a mistake they wouldn't make twice. We stood for a moment, staring at each other.

"You have the seal." The voice was thick with hatred.

"Aelia?" I asked.

She laughed softly. The mask's expression remained the same. I didn't care for the effect.

"I'm not Venatori," I said.

"None of them were."

A dark wave of energy sped my way, but this time I was faster. I dodged and thrust my arm upward, encouraging the spear of ice I created at her feet to follow suit.

Aelia moved, but not fast enough. The ice caught her in the side and she stumbled. An opening. I willed the air around her to slow and then

released it. The change in momentum threw her off course and she crashed into the pitted brick of a run-down tenement.

Straightening, Aelia threw the mask from her face, revealing short red hair and a look even angrier than I'd expected.

The mask hit the opposite wall with a clang.

A distraction—and for the split second it needed to, it worked. Aelia's other hand still held the dagger. As she returned the hand that had thrown the mask, she made the slice across her palm.

I felt light-headed as she began to drain my energy. Aelia clenched her fist, drawing more power from herself, and I stumbled into the wall where the mask had fallen.

She came in fast with her dagger and I threw up an arm to block the worst of it. She twisted the blade in her hand, cutting into my muscle, but at least it wasn't my neck. Still, I cried out. I felt a tug at my waist as she pulled away the pouch that held the necklace.

"Our lives for the glory of Tevinter reborn."

"You're Venatori," I said. "Why—?"

"Minrathous has forgotten its way," Aelia said. "It falls to us to put it right. To make it rise."

I gasped as Aelia pressed the seal to my injured arm. Her other hand held the dagger to my throat. I felt dizzy again—from the pain or her magic or the blood loss, I didn't know.

"The traitor's blood would have been justice. Yours and mine will do."

I could feel her channeling magic into the necklace, draining power from me to help unfold its enchantment. With a sharp snap, the seal broke and the ground below us heaved. A giddy smile crossed her face.

My throat would have been slit next, but her pause was enough. With an effort, I cast a blast of wind, knocking her from me. The dagger skittered across the cobblestones. I let an array of ice crystals form in the air around me. I doubted I could throw them with any accuracy, but she just needed to buy the bluff.

Aelia kept her distance. "The Hour's here. Live the last of yours. Consider it gratitude for your service."

I let her footsteps disappear before sliding down the wall. The ice crystals fell to the ground around me.

I needed to stop the bleeding. Drawing the magic took effort. I'm not a healer, but I can patch up a wound well enough. I slowed the blood

flow, tore off the sleeve of my blouse, and wrapped the wound as best I could. It wasn't pretty, but it would last the Hour.

***

The man in the shop may not have talked, but there was another person who knew about the necklace—or the "seal," as Aelia had called it—and I had him cornered. His trunk lay behind us where he'd dropped it in the street and his back was to me. I kept hold of the magic keeping him there.

"How did you find me?" Flavian Bataris asked. The silver egret pin bobbed nervously at his throat—just as it had the last time we'd met. His name, along with the name of the boat he'd hired, had cost me the rest of the evening and enough coin for a week's worth of fish dinners.

"People who scurry around the lower market after dark don't wear gold-embroidered robes." I walked carefully around him until we were face-to-face, then pointed to the silver egret. "And they don't advertise themselves with the family crest."

Flavian flushed. It was an embarrassing error, though maybe not the one he regretted most. I held up half of the four-winged dragon so he could get a good look. Aelia had taken off with the rest of the necklace.

"You failed to get me killed," I said calmly.

"That wasn't the point," Flavian said. "I was getting rid of it."

"And you let the right people know you no longer had it," I said.

If Flavian was capable of remorse, he wasn't wasting it on me. "Someone was going to die—if that's broken then most of Minrathous will. That included you anyway. Or you might have stopped Aelia. Between the two of us, you had a better chance."

I dropped the magic holding Flavian in place. Flavian folded his arms, then unfolded them, then clasped his hands.

"You didn't like my odds against Aelia," I said.

Flavian eyed my arm. "Was I wrong? Besides, I don't like anyone's."

As if in support, a tremble shook the ground beneath us. A young couple by the pier pulled apart, looking around in confusion, then went back to it.

"What are the necklaces for?" I asked.

"Corypheus wanted Tevinter reborn," Flavian said. "He trusted Minrathous to be the jewel of his new world. He planned to return here

after his victory in the south."

"What are they for, Flavian?" I said.

"There's a demon sealed beneath the city. If it's let out . . ." He made a dismissive gesture, as if tossing Minrathous aside. "Corypheus would rebuild. That was the plan."

"Minrathous has defeated demons before," I said.

"Not like this," Flavian said. "I'm not even sure *demon*'s the right word. It's something only a god could summon." At the look on my face, he added: "If not a god, Corypheus was close enough."

Another tremble shook below us and I took a step to steady myself. People along the docks were starting to look worried now. I saw a man run toward one of the storehouses. The young couple hurried away.

"Keep going," I said.

"Eight of us held the seals to its prison. Blood-bound. We couldn't speak of them. The death of the others was the only thing that could shock me into giving mine away."

"Control that subtle for that long. Unless someone actively renewed the hold, it's not possi–"

"Corypheus was close enough," Flavian said. "If Minrathous wasn't ready to kneel, the demon would make sure it did. The Hour of Minrathous's Return."

"Corypheus is dead," I said.

"And the plan was as well. Until Aelia took over. The Venatori still want the Tevinter Corypheus promised, whether he's around for it or not. All she needed were the seals."

"Not all of you agreed," I said.

"Lady Varantus was one of Corypheus's most devout. After his fall, she had a 'crisis of conscience.' Her devotion to charity and the Chantry? Sincere, if it also answers to guilt. Paxus? I think he just wanted to be in charge over Aelia."

"What about you?" I asked.

A weak grin spread over Flavian's face. "I've been a worse person. I'll settle for dying a bad one. Or better yet, living elsewhere."

"And Quentin?"

Flavian let out that yelp of a laugh. "Calla? He was barely one of us to begin with. He was told the Venatori would end slavery. When he found out the rest—a few threats to his family kept him in line long enough. He was only bound to a seal because manipulating the Calla family was

useful at the time. In the end I suspect he was sending information to the Inquisition. By then, I preferred the idea of living over Corypheus's plans."

There it was. I had my answer—who Quentin Calla had been and why he'd died.

Flavian moved to pick up his trunk then swore as I froze him in place again. "Aelia won't wait. The Hour's here. If you let me go, we can both leave. I'll pay your way out."

"Where is she?"

"It's already started," he said, trying to track me with his eyes while his limbs remained in place. When I didn't respond he gave up on me. "Die how you want. The Catacombs. One of the hidden ones. There's more than one entrance. The only one I knew was in Lady Varantus's study."

I released the spell and Flavian grabbed his trunk and began hauling it down to the docks. It broke halfway to the pier and he left it, running toward his way out.

* * *

Knight-Templar Rana Savas had not expected me to turn up at her rooms in the templar quarters after dark—or for me to be covered in blood when I did. I'd done enough to patch the injury, but my coat was still stained from Aelia's attack. I held up half of a four-winged dragon.

"Worse for wear, I admit, but you can't say I didn't give it back."

"What happened?" She took the broken seal firmly even as she checked my arm. Leave it to Rana Savas to show concern and confiscate templar-claimed property at the same time. It's a gift.

"The killer's Venatori," I said and filled her in on an evening that already felt too long.

"We need to move," Rana said. She wasn't wrong, and I was ready, but then: "Something this big—the knight-commander needs to know. I'll inform him straightaway."

I don't know what I expected from Rana. That's not true. I'd known exactly what to expect and it was this and, like a fool, I was frustrated anyway.

"The Hour's now, Rana," I said.

"Yes. That's why—"

"You'll tell the knight-commander. And he'll consult his friend the justicar and we'll wait until morning while they check in with the Varantus family," I said. "The city could shake down around them and they'll jump through the same hoops. That's if we're lucky and they don't already know what the family's hiding."

"You don't know that," Rana said, but she was contradicting me more than she was defending her commander.

"Do you want to know why I don't like working with templars? It's not your rules or sense of fair play. It's because there are people like you and Jahvis who try. Or you *want* to. And too many times out of ten, it's the wrong coin in the right hands that makes you stop."

"That's not what this is," Rana said. Then, when I didn't answer: "If that's what you think, why did you come here?"

I sighed. "Maybe I hoped this would be one of the few times out of ten. Mostly so when it's too late, someone I trust will know what went wrong. If what Flavian said is true, you'll need the head start."

"Someone will listen. We need to organize."

I shook my head. What else was there to say?

"How far can you get on your own?" Rana asked.

"I don't know," I said. My arm was sore, everything was sore. My head begged for sleep. "But when I get there, I'll know it's as far as I could."

For once, she didn't follow me outside. I left Rana standing in her doorway and headed back into the night.

***

The knight-commander had posted his own men outside Lady Varantus's house. He claimed the Varantus family was worried about thieves stealing their inheritance before they had it sorted. More likely they wanted to keep people out until they burned evidence of any Venatori connections.

Whether they believed the claims or didn't care about the truth, the guards outside weren't expecting trouble. Only one was posted by the back entrance, and once distracted by a convenient noise, he didn't see anyone slip inside.

Lady Varantus had been removed from the study and the floor cleaned, but some vague sense of superstition made me skirt the last

place I'd seen her anyway. The large marble snake shone in the moonlight, the gold-plate eyes disinterested in my visit.

I reached the fireplace and quickly scanned the stone beneath the mantel. On the far-right end was a carving of a four-winged dragon—just as Rana had said. I gave the stone a slight push, felt the give, and pushed harder. I heard a faint click and a stairway opened in front of the empty fireplace, leading down to the Catacombs below. I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding and carefully made my way down.

The streets of Minrathous are never truly empty, even the ones that run underground. The Catacombs are as ancient as Minrathous itself. Officially, they're for storage—a place to hold a year's worth of food and supplies, securing the city's survival in case of blight or Qunari invasion. Unofficially, they hold as many shady corners, forgotten places, and dark secrets as you'd expect.

Pale blue wisp-lights had been lit along the underground passage, dim but enough for me to move without creating a light of my own. The high ceilings disappeared into the shadows above. The walls were largely plain, though even here there were echoes of the ornamentation found on the buildings above—a pillar carved like a dragon, a fresco meant for almost no one to see. A faint vibration ran through the ground beneath me and I stopped admiring the art.

It wasn't long before I could make out the flicker of orange light up ahead. A voice echoed back to me off the stone walls. Another vibration ran through the ground and I felt a strange buzzing in my head. It was thick with a feeling I couldn't understand and an expansive need for emptiness.

"Corypheus's fall was a test," came Aelia's voice. She sounded strained, but no less resolute for it. "Would we surrender Tevinter as well? Deny it a chance to rise? What is our answer?"

"Our lives for the glory of Tevinter reborn." The answer came from more voices than I could take alone.

I moved toward the light, ignoring the sick feeling in the back of my head. I pulled myself behind a pillar before getting too close and took in the scene in front of me.

"The seals are broken," Aelia said. "The traitors could not escape their blood debt. The Loyal paid their own and will be rewarded. We reach the Hour of Minrathous's Return."

A small crowd of Venatori—thirty or so—stood in front of Aelia. I could see now why her voice was strained. It appeared breaking the seals was only the start of the ritual. If this had been Corypheus's plan—and the demon was as bad as Flavian claimed—there was a fair chance the final steps were meant for a god, or whatever he had been.

That hadn't stopped Aelia.

A bleeding Venatori lay slouched at her feet, his arm limply held up to hers, his skin an unlively gray. Aelia herself was focusing all her power into a large stone obelisk. It rose the full height of the catacomb and there were deep cracks in the stone at its base.

Below the obelisk, a shadow moved at odds with the lights that cast it. Looking at it caused the buzz in my head to grow louder. Whatever I was looking at, it was the edge of something deeper. If this was a demon at all, it was older and larger and more nameless than any demon I'd ever heard of and so much worse besides. If that thing rose, there wouldn't be a Minrathous left.

I cursed under my breath. What did I think I was going to do? If I'd stayed away, I would die with everyone else, but I could have done so in bed. Maybe with a good book or a nice supper. But since I was here . . .

The man at Aelia's feet was already dead. Moving fast, I hit him with a snap of cold magic.

Aelia let out a yell of frustration as the source of her power literally froze up. She caught sight of me at once but held her place by the obelisk. Going after me would mean dropping the ritual, and she loved her false god and warped dreams more than she hated me. Still, I'd slowed her down.

"Bring her here!" Aelia yelled, which turned out lucky for me.

Limited to attacks of the nonlethal variety, I managed to hold back the first set of attackers. A frost slick on the catacomb's stone floor sent several Venatori reeling while another found himself pinned in ice. Focusing, I pulled at the air around the cultists, slowing them down. But there were thirty of them and only one of me and I couldn't last forever. In the end, two Venatori caught me and dragged me toward the stone obelisk.

"Minrathous is broken," Aelia said, as her followers held me at her side. The shadow pulsed uncomfortably close. I didn't think it could hurt me yet, but I twisted away from it all the same.

Minrathous buried people every day. It closed its eyes and pretended they didn't exist, that the power grabs and politics weren't tearing it down —and it was about to be torn down for it.

I was starting to regret not having that nice bed and supper again, when I caught a glimpse of movement just outside the ring of light.

Knight-Templar Rana Savas.

Scanning along the shadows now, I caught Knight-Captain Jahvis's eye. He gave me a curt nod. To his left, Brom was making his way to the far side of the circle. People will surprise you. All three templars were carrying enchanted weapons designed to subdue mages—swords for Jahvis and Rana and a heavy mace for Brom. The weapons looked almost ordinary, but I could see the faint shine of Fade-touched metal and knew they'd be marked with the Circle's seal. In keeping the mages happy, Minrathous templars need to be assigned those weapons for specific and approved circumstances only. I had a feeling Knight-Captain Jahvis had skipped that part.

Aelia tilted her head toward me and I lowered my eyes, not wanting to give the templars away before they were ready.

"You do know that whatever you're raising—" I began

"Minrathous's salvation." Aelia's voice was even more strained than before. Without blood to fuel her, she was having trouble maintaining the ritual on her own.

"Sure, that," I said. "There's no way you can control it."

"It will fulfill its purpose," Aelia said. "Minrathous will return to its former glory."

"Did it have glory?" I asked. If she hadn't needed to focus on the ritual, I'm fairly certain I'd be dead for that.

Another tremor ran through the Catacombs. Dust shook from the ceiling and the shadow pulsed farther outward. Whatever it was, it didn't care about glory or anything like it.

"You and I shattered the seal," Aelia said. "You and I can finish this." She drew a knife from her waist and handed it to one of the Venatori holding me.

"Better people than you or I will do that," I said.

A beam of light directed from Rana's sword struck the crowd, paralyzing anyone it hit. Those that could still move rushed to defend themselves from their new attackers.

Distracted, one of the Venatori holding me loosened his grip and his friend met the full force of my newly freed fist. I brought my elbow back hard, hitting the first Venatori square in the stomach, before pushing them both back with a blast of ice.

The shadow heaved as the templars fought the Venatori. It was darker now, thicker, too, but still formless. I saw a steel-haired Venatori stumble near the writhing darkness. Before he could straighten back up, the shadow was wrapped around his wrists. The cultist jerked to his knees. His body convulsed. Silence fell suddenly on both sides, broken by the screams of the old man as he sunk from view.

If I'd thought there'd been chaos before, I was wrong. Some Venatori continued to fight, others ran. I saw Brom lose his balance as the earth trembled again. He hit the ground with a metal clang and was swarmed by a trio of Venatori. Before I could move, a beam of light shot from his mace, knocking his attackers back and sending another cultist into the shadow. Brom rose awkwardly to his feet, one arm limp by his side, his movements hampered by whatever magic the Venatori had cast at him. I saw Rana race toward him, stopping the large templar from being pulled into the shadow himself.

Through it all, Aelia had not broken the ritual. There was fresh blood on her arm—she'd taken on fueling the magic alone.

I crossed the space between us and grabbed her by the wrist. She tried to shake me off, but I hung on, concentrating on slowing her bleeding, patching her wounds just enough.

"You won't—" But before she could finish, I punched her in the face. Aelia stumbled backward and the connection broke.

The swift disruption of the ritual knocked us both back. Aelia screamed as she realized the shadow was gone. I sent a wall of ice up and over the obelisk. It wouldn't hold back disaster on its own, but it was enough to hold secure until the justicars sent experts smarter than me to deal with it.

Rana joined us and dragged Aelia to her feet.

"Telling the knight-commander went well after all," I said dryly.

"It will," Rana said, and she sounded both thrilled and appalled by the rule bending that had brought her here.

"We weren't looking into Lady Varantus," Knight-Captain Jahvis said. "We were tracking down a missing mage. Neve Gallus." My smile was sincere. He looked tired and I was feeling sympathetic.

"Good work here tonight," Jahvis said to his templars. Rana smiled. Brom just shrugged. Of the two, I sided with Brom.

I knew what would happen next. The demon—or whatever it was—would be sealed. No one would talk about it because doing so would admit the Venatori still had too much power. Some of the Venatori would face their crimes, others would claim they were victims of blood-magic control. The ones who had money would find that it was enough of an excuse.

It was still dark when we left the Catacombs. The city was hushed, if hardly sleeping, with no idea what had happened.

"Minrathous is broken," Aelia spat at me.

"I know," I said. "But you aren't the one to fix it."

I left Aelia to the templars. I wanted sleep more than anything, but there was one more stop I had to make.

***

If Rana Savas had been surprised to see me at her door in the middle of the night, Otho Calla was baffled to find me at his before sunrise the next morning—and more than a little annoyed to be woken by a servant to see me.

"What do you want?" he said, then caught sight of my bloodstained coat and dust-filled hair. "*Venhedis*. If you've brought trouble . . ."

"For what it's worth, you weren't wrong to give Quentin a second chance," I said. "He'd left the Venatori. There's nothing 'unsavory' in his last days either."

Otho ran a tired hand over his face. "Does it matter now?"

"It might to you. That's your decision. You wanted the truth—you have it."

"I already paid you," he said, but I was already leaving.

"I know."

I heard the heavy door to the Calla house start to creak close behind me, then pause.

"Why didn't he just tell me?" Otho called after me, but the plea in his voice was for someone already dead.

I paused, resting a hand on the carved dragon at Otho's front gate. Morning light was starting to push through the city, people already moving through the street in front of me, ready to start the day.

Why hadn't Quentin told him? The easy answer was he couldn't. But had he wanted to? Had he tried? Did it matter?

"I don't know," I said and walked away.

THE WIGMAKER JOB

COURTNEY WOODS

In a cold, dark room beneath the streets of Vyrantium, Ambrose Forfex prepared for the wig show of the season. Using a thimble as a gauge for thickness, he measured out a lock of hair. His slender fingers brushed through the strands. The silky texture made him tremble.

There were no imperfections. No split ends. No breakage. Only hair —*lush and velvety*—in its purest form.

A throaty sigh escaped the Wigmaker's lips. "Flawless."

The approaching pitter-patter of footsteps interrupted the moment—*his* moment. Two hooded figures stopped at the entrance of the Wigmaker's workshop. They didn't dare enter.

"Ambrose. We need to talk," one of them said.

"Your boots sound like dead fish slapping against cobblestone." Ambrose sniffed.

"Upstairs," the other replied.

Ambrose let the tresses slip ever so delicately through his fingertips. "I'll return soon," he murmured, then followed the pair up the staircase to the main living quarters.

Only when they were safely in the sitting room with the curtains drawn did the figures lower their hoods. They were both altus, the highest class of mage in the Tevinter Imperium.

"You need to cancel the event," Crispin Kavlo stated. His father was a magister and he had grand plans to follow in his footsteps.

"Need?" Ambrose mocked. "How dramatic."

"This is serious," Felicia Erimond said. Her brother Livius had introduced Ambrose to the Venatori—opened his eyes to a future where the Imperium could once again be great.

"Someone's put a contract on your head. Just like the others. *The Crows are coming*." She whispered the last part as if those words alone could summon the infamous assassins.

Ambrose stifled a groan. "The dragon does not fear the crow."

"It does when it's already killed *eight* other dragons," Crispin snapped. He had begun to sweat. His eyes darted toward the closed doors and windows like a caged animal's.

"Look at you—quivering over *Antivan propaganda*." Ambrose leveled the man with an unimpressed glare. "This is why the Imperium is in shambles."

Without warning, the Wigmaker grabbed Crispin's arm. The younger mage winced and tried to pull away as Ambrose dug a pointed thumbnail into his forearm. Blood, crimson and thick, seeped from underneath the nail.

"Crows are flesh and blood. Nothing more." He muttered a quick spell to close the wound. "The show will go on."

Crispin jerked back and held his freshly healed arm against his chest.

Ambrose crossed the room to a small but well-stocked bar. All this talk of Antiva was making him thirsty.

"The man who's taken the contract is no ordinary Crow," Felicia explained, careful to keep her voice steady.

Ambrose uncorked the wine with a wave of his hand and began pouring it into a crystal decanter.

"He's Lucanis Dellamorte."

The bottle *clanged* against the crystal. A crack splintered down the glass.

"Ah."

Goose bumps pebbled the Wigmaker's neck. He set the decanter back on the counter and sighed.

"Shit."

***

In an unassuming inn, on an unassuming road, Lucanis Dellamorte sat with a whetstone in hand, his favorite sword resting across his knees. The monotonous movement of grinding stone against metal soothed him. Seven daggers of various size and shape lay polished and glistening on a rough wool blanket at his feet.

Music—mixed with laughter and gossip—choked through the floorboards.

Lucanis closed his eyes. His mind separated the sounds until they painted a picture.

A waitress rushed from the kitchen.

Two lovers took advantage of a shadowy booth. Their lips smacked together, wet and wanton.

A man cheated at Wicked Grace. The card up his sleeve strained against the starched fabric of his shirt.

None is a threat.

He relaxed.

"You're not wearing that, are you?" Illario asked, while admiring his own reflection.

Lucanis glanced down at his ensemble. The jet leather greatcoat and black-on-black suit might have been conspicuous during the day, but for a night job, it was the tactical choice. He compared his outfit to his cousin's high-collared, navy and gold tunic. It was something an Antivan thought a Vint would wear.

"At least I don't look like a tourist," he replied, a faint smile tugging at his lips.

Illario spritzed his hair with oil and slicked it back with both hands.

"No, you look like you're attending a funeral."

"Very funny," Lucanis said flatly and returned to sharpening his blade. "It's a job. Not a party."

"Actually, it's a job *at* a party. Might as well look our best." Illario flicked open a straight razor to trim an errant follicle of stubble that was ruining his otherwise pristine five o'clock shadow.

"Any excuse to primp."

"Hey—I'm only here because of you," Illario grumbled. "We should be halfway home right now. Only 'the Great Lucanis Dellamorte' could delay a summons from the First Talon herself."

Lucanis set his sword aside. Illario was generally thick-skinned—except when it came to their grandmother. "Caterina can hardly

complain. She's the one who beat into me my commitment to contracts."

Memories of sweat-filled days without food or water came unbidden. Lucanis's back tingled from where his grandmother's cane had bruised his flesh for letting his guard down or fumbling his footwork.

For years, he'd hated her. But his time as a Master Assassin had since taught Lucanis that Caterina's cruelty was her way of making sure that he was prepared for this life—that he survived.

"All that effort training and grooming us, and the old woman still won't step aside." Beneath the bitterness in Illario's tone was something rotten.

"Your time will come," Lucanis assured him.

"Will it?" Illario's piercing gaze met Lucanis's in the mirror. "People talk. You've always been her favorite."

He'd heard the rumors. For all their secrets and intrigue, the Antivan Crows were a chatty bunch.

"My talents lie elsewhere," Lucanis said, gesturing toward the arsenal around him. "You're the one with the silver tongue."

"So, if she named you heir to House Dellamorte, you'd refuse?"

Lucanis opened his mouth to respond, when he realized someone was creeping up the stairs.

He listened. The footsteps were too quiet, too sure to belong to a drunk. *A servant? Doubtful.* When he'd bought out the floor, Lucanis had given the innkeeper explicit instructions to keep her people downstairs.

That left the Venatori . . . unless someone else on his long list of enemies had found him.

"Lucanis?" Illario pressed.

He held up a hand and clutched the worn leather grip of his sword.

Illario's pretty-boy mask slipped as a coldness flooded his features. A retractable dagger shot out from under his sleeve.

The intruder was at the top of the stairs and moving closer.

Lucanis motioned Illario to talk again.

"This isn't *Cacio e Pepe*," Illario complained, while making a show of tapping his dagger against a plate of leftovers.

"You ordered an Antivan dish in Tevinter. What did you expect?" Lucanis replied. Talking now meant the intruder wouldn't know where he'd be later.

"Something edible," Illario quipped.

In three quick, silent strides, Lucanis positioned himself next to the suite's entrance. He could hear someone breathing on the other side. Their gloved fingers hugged the wall for cover.

Lucanis could've laughed. *People put too much faith in walls.*

Rearing back, he thrust his sword through wood and plaster until it hit bone—and kept going.

A shriek echoed through the hall, followed by a thud.

Lucanis stood and stalked through the door. A hooded man, wiry and mustached, was trying to pull his impaled hand free. A mage's staff lay next to him. Upon seeing Lucanis, he reached for it. Energy—raw and potent—charged the air. The back of Lucanis's eyeballs itched—a physical instinct he had developed when someone was tapping into the Fade.

He clapped a hand over the mage's mouth and slammed his skull against the wall. "Knock it off."

Dazed, the mage dropped his staff. The energy dissipated.

Lucanis grabbed the man by the collar and yanked him toward the door, causing the blade to carve an L-shaped slice through his skewered palm.

Illario waited with a chair and rope.

"Sit down." He beamed. "Enjoy a little Antivan hospitality."

While his cousin secured their prisoner's bindings, Lucanis retrieved his sword from the wall.

The mage was coming to. His unfocused eyes took stock of his situation.

"I won't talk," he spat. "Even if you torture me."

"I'm too busy to torture you," Lucanis said, and ran him through with his sword.

Shock swept across the mage's gaunt face. Beneath a trembling mustache, his lips were wet with blood. He tried to speak, but the words got clogged in his throat. He slumped forward.

Illario frowned. "If I'd known you were just going to kill him, I wouldn't've put so much effort into the knots."

"Check his pockets."

"Ah—" Illario said, pulling a scroll from the mage's jacket. "Found something."

The seal was broken, but the imprint of two dragons was still visible in the wax. "Venatori."

"Thought as much. What's it say?"

Illario unrolled the parchment and scanned the page. "'Gallant brothers and sisters . . . In our veins runs true Tevinter blood, passed down from the dreamers—'" Illario's head snapped up as Lucanis began pulling his sword from the mage's chest. "*Careful!* Remember the tanner job? You ruined my best shirt."

Lucanis smirked and continued extracting the blade.

Illario took two wary steps back, then continued reading, "'The importance of vigilance' . . . 'It's our Maker-given right' . . . blah, blah, blah—Oh, here. 'The Venatori will not cower to foreign mercenaries.'"

No, they'll just die to them. The blade slipped cleanly from the wound. "Anything else?"

"'Whoever clips the Crow's wings will walk by my side when we enter the Black City and take back glory for the Imperium.'" Illario lowered the scroll, perplexed. "Well, that doesn't seem worth it."

"That's because you're not a true believer—except when it comes to coin."

Illario shrugged, unabashed, then handed Lucanis the scroll. "It's signed *A*. Seems our mark doesn't want you crashing his party."

Lucanis stuck the scroll on the dead mage's chest. "He's going to be disappointed."

***

Downstairs, the tavern's nightly merriment continued. The Crows cut striking figures as they meandered through tipsy, twirling dancers and sidestepped servants bearing plates of stew and fresh bread. Both men were lean with dark hair and umber eyes. Illario was all smiles. His was a calculated handsomeness. From his smooth skin to his perfect, white teeth, everything was contrived to be enticing. As they walked through the crowd, he basked in the appreciative glances he received, while Lucanis stared ahead, focused and intense. He was the kind of man you couldn't look away from—until he looked at you.

When the innkeeper spotted them, her ruddy cheeks paled. Lucanis sidled up to the bar and slid two sovereigns across the uneven wood. "For the mess," he whispered, watching her throat bobble.

The innkeeper dropped the coins into her apron's front pocket with shaky fingers and avoided his gaze until she was sure he was gone.

"You know," Illario said as they left the inn, "she's likely the one who leaked our whereabouts to the Venatori."

Lucanis breathed in the night air. Every city had its scent. Vyrantium's was spiced meat mixed with wet laundry.

"I'm aware."

"And you're paying her because . . . ?"

"Innkeepers like to gossip—to customers, employees, other innkeepers. Next time the Venatori want information on the Antivan Crows, she'll know who to back. And she'll tell her friends."

Lucanis started down the street. Illario trailed behind at a casual pace.

"So, what's the plan? Now that Ambrose knows we're coming."

"I always assume the mark knows I'm coming," Lucanis replied. "We were never going through the front door."

Illario sped up to catch his cousin. "I bought *this*—" He gestured toward his tunic. "Because *you* said we were dispatching Tevinter's 'premiere wigmaker' at an exclusive party. Emphasis on 'exclusive.'"

"Uh-huh."

"It was a rush order. We were with the tailor for hours."

"I recall."

Lucanis took a sharp turn down an alley. Above them, balconies jutted out like cramped elbows finding space in a crowd. A cat hissed in the distance.

"Why let me go through the motions of purchasing formal wear for an event we're not *actually* attending?"

"I know how much you enjoy dressing up," Lucanis goaded and ducked under a pointed archway.

"Only if I'm going to be *seen*." Illario groaned. His boot stepped in something squishy and foul-smelling. "And why are we in the dog shit part of town? Shouldn't a high-ranking member of the Venatori live in a mansion?"

"He does. We're taking a shortcut."

The archway led to a courtyard. Patches of brown grass, treaded and uncared for, encircled a statue of a scorched *vhenadahl*—an elven "tree of the people." The real tree had burned down after a slave rebellion. The masters commissioned the current statue as a reminder of the price for rising against them. Somehow, Lucanis didn't think it had the intended effect.

“A shortcut that leads to a dead end. How novel,” Illario muttered and pulled the collar of his tunic closer to his nose.

Lucanis ignored him and approached the tree. The brass, skeletal branches had produced a layer of patina, and streaks of erosion lined the bark. He ran his fingers across the trunk until he found a groove that gave way, opening a secret passage.

Lucanis tossed a smug look over his shoulder. “You were saying?”

Illario rolled his eyes and followed his cousin into the passage, down a winding set of limestone stairs.

“I wouldn’t complain, if you filled me in,” he grumbled.

“Yes, you would.”

“As much,” Illario conceded. “I wouldn’t complain as much.”

The passage was musty with age. The uppermost stairs were four stones wide and four stones long, but with each step they grew narrower. The middle stones sagged from years of use. Lucanis had almost tripped the first time he ventured down here. The only source of light was from the torches of green veilfire nailed to the brick walls. Flecks of minerals and crushed glass in the brick flickered and winked at them.

“It’s like swirling down a wine bottle,” Illario mumbled, peering over the edge.

At the bottom, they found an elf in a scarlet coat guarding a large steel door. She greeted Lucanis with a cordial smile.

“Master Dellamorte. And . . .” Her friendly façade faltered as she spotted Illario.

“Master Dellamorte the Lesser,” Illario offered with a grin.

“My cousin,” Lucanis clarified.

Appeased, the elf asked, “Where does your business take you tonight?”

“Up.”

She nodded. Lucanis planted his feet firmly on the ground. The elf clapped her hands together, snuffing out the veilfire. The room began to spin—gently at first, then faster. Lucanis bit back a laugh as Illario held out an arm to steady himself.

A few seconds later, the room slowed to a stop and the veilfire burned once more. The elf opened the door to reveal another spiral staircase.

“Oh, good. More stairs,” Illario deadpanned.

Lucanis bowed his head in thanks and slipped a sovereign into the elf’s gloved palm.

"Happy hunting," she whispered as they passed, then shut the door behind them.

"You've made friends," Illario remarked as they began the climb.

"You would, too, if you ever left Treviso."

"I'm here now, aren't I?" he argued. "Seriously, though, what is this place?"

"A perk. Given by our mysterious benefactor." Lucanis quickened his pace, hoping to leave the answer at that.

Illario did not take the hint. "Speaking of, I have some questions about him . . . her . . . them?"

"I'm sure you do."

"Oh, come on," Illario urged, matching Lucanis's pace. "When have we ever taken on an anonymous client?"

"Since someone could put tangible stock in the phrase 'Silence is golden.'"

"You're not the least bit curious?"

Lucanis exhaled through his nose. "If someone wants to pay me top coin to kill a bunch of racist blood mages—*who have it coming*—I'm not going to complain."

"Well, when you put it that way . . ."

At the top of the stairs was an empty platform with no windows or doors. A blanket of moss carpeted the floor.

Illario let out a disappointed huff. "That's anticlimactic."

"Just wait," Lucanis promised. He approached the far wall and began tapping the bricks until he found a hollow one. When he pushed against it, the mortar turned languid and flexible, allowing the bricks to peel back like skin.

"Well?" Lucanis asked.

Illario tilted his head. "Better."

Stars and a warm breeze greeted them on the other side. As they stepped off the platform, the bricks locked back in place. They were several stories aboveground on the third arched tier of Vyrantium's famed floating aqueduct.

"The Wigmaker's estate is a short walk that way," Lucanis explained, pointing to their left. "One jump and we'll have access to his roof."

"Devious."

The Crows strolled across the covered channel, listening to the steady stream of water flowing beneath their feet.

Farther below was a chorus of street traffic. Minrathous was Tevinter's capital, but Vyrantium was her sharp-dressed sister. Amid the sea of brightly colored tunics, stiletto heels clicked against cobblestone. Necks both fat and thin held up heavy, ornate headpieces with trailing gold-embroidered veils. Music from lyres and lutes wrestled for dominance as hawkers touted the latest fashions. Apparently, velveteen was in.

Lucanis peeked over the side. No one looked up. *One of the world's greatest wonders is mundane to these people*.

"How do they get it to float?" Illario asked, tapping his boot tip against the aqueduct.

"Magic." Lucanis scoured the rooftops, searching for one made of a distinctive red clay. They were still a few buildings away.

"So, the Wigmaker." Illario wiggled his fingers ominously. "Tell me about him."

"He's weird," Lucanis replied bluntly. He found the moments before a job crucial for focus, but Illario was never one for comfortable silence.

"*Specifics*, cousin. No one hires us to kill normal people."

"I gave you a dossier."

"Yes, but I want your assessment."

"*I* wrote it. It is my assessment."

"Humor me."

The red clay roof was in sight now.

"You'll see soon enough." With a feline grace, Lucanis leapt off the side of the aqueduct.

If they had been paying attention, the line of people wrapped around the Wigmaker's estate would've seen two shadows pass overhead, but their focus was on the stern-faced doormen guarding the entrance. Having your name on the guest list wasn't enough to make it inside one of Ambrose's parties—your outfit had to impress, as well.

Both Crows landed on the roof with a soft thud. Clay tiles weren't ideal for stealth. Their round shape offered little traction for their boots, and if one tile slipped, others would follow like a line of loyal soldiers. But at least Illario was too busy concentrating to ask questions.

The front of the Wigmaker's estate was a collection of domed rotundas encased in a zigzagging red and beige brick. Guests weren't allowed inside the mansion itself. They were led directly to a grand,

circular courtyard, surrounded by a two-tiered arcade, at the back of the house.

Moving in tandem, Lucanis and Illario dropped to their chests and shimmied to the edge overlooking the courtyard.

Tevinter parties—especially thrown by the altus—were known for their excess. Lucanis still remembered the first gala he had attended in Minrathous. Rows and rows of tables had been overladen with jugs of wine and platters of food from all over Thedas. Retching vases were placed in corners for guests to relieve themselves if they overindulged. Prized slaves were brought out to perform. Acrobats tumbled overhead. Musicians played until their fingers blistered. While hunting his mark, Lucanis had opened the wrong door and walked into an orgy. *Getting out of that had been interesting*.

The Wigmaker's periwig show contained all this and more. A catwalk had been constructed at the center of the courtyard. Running down both sides were grooves for wine to flow from two dragon-shaped spouting fountains. The guests leaned over from plush chaise lounges to refill their cups in the streams. They poured wine into each other's mouths and over their bodies, ruining the chic costumes that had been their ticket inside.

On the runway, models walked, naked and dead-eyed. Floor-length hair hung over their sagging shoulders and gaunt hipbones. With each stride, their wigs transformed into miraculous, towering creations. On one, the hair twisted and curled to take the shape of a tree with a bird dancing to attract a mate. Another portrayed a nest of vipers, their striped, sinuous bodies writhing against each other. As the wigs came alive, the models' blank faces altered to flash manic smiles, but Lucanis noticed their eyes remained lifeless.

His skull felt raw. The backs of his eyeballs itched like he hadn't blinked in days. Whatever magic Ambrose was using for his creations was tearing at the seams of the Veil.

"Something's wrong."

"Yeah," Illario agreed, zeroing in on a group of half-dressed revelers, "we're up here, away from the fun."

Lucanis snapped his fingers in front of his cousin's face. "Focus."

"I am."

"On the job."

"To be fair, you never told me the plan."

Lucanis shrugged. "Find Ambrose. Slit his throat."

"Sounds complicated."

"It will be. The Veil's thin here. Thinner than I expected." He rubbed the stubble on his chin. "One wrong spell and this place will be swarming with demons."

"Then let's kill the bastard and scram. I want to see what this city has to offer."

"Our ship sails at dawn."

Illario waved a dismissive hand. "Plenty of time for some good, old-fashioned debauch—"

"I see him," Lucanis interrupted.

In the arcade above the catwalk, a man flanked by guards watched the emaciated models from the shadows. Ambrose Forfex was of average height and build, with hawkish gold eyes and a jaw that could break teeth. His scalp and cheeks were both clean-shaven, leaving his face bare except for two black, sculpted brows.

"They're never what you envision, are they?" Illario noted.

"What did you expect?"

"Hair, for one. Maybe a funny little dog."

That got a chuckle out of Lucanis, if only briefly. The way the Wigmaker stared at his creations was unnerving. Illario was right—a mark's physical appearance was unpredictable. But the gleam in their eyes—the appetite to do something unspeakable—that was always the same.

A woman rushed toward Ambrose's retinue. She wore an emerald gown with a high waisted-low tiered skirt and a fitted tulle bodice studded with champagne-colored crystals. Metallic body paint shimmered on her exposed arms and legs. Something about the woman's movements and stature were familiar, but Lucanis couldn't place her.

"Well, hello," Illario purred. "Who is this lovely *fiore*?"

After whispering something in Ambrose's ear that made him scowl, the woman motioned the guards to take the Wigmaker to the main house.

Suddenly, Lucanis knew exactly who she was. "Guard Captain Camille Spina."

Illario whistled softly. "This job is looking better all the time."

Once Ambrose was safely inside, Camille slipped a key ring from the silk-brocade layers of her skirt and secured the door.

Lucanis frowned. "I need those keys."

"Your wish is my command, cousin," Illario said, and flipped forward in one fluid motion.

* * *

Following closely from the roof, Lucanis watched Illario slink through the crowd like a fox in the henhouse. Despite his earlier jab, Lucanis had to admit, if only to himself, that his cousin looked at home among the local gentry. Illario winked at strangers as if they'd known each other for years, and the Vints were either too drunk or thought him too attractive to question his familiarity.

Meanwhile, Camille made a valiant attempt to appear natural while sweeping the perimeter, but the instinctive nods to her fellow guards gave her away. Illario waited until she broke for refreshment to make his move.

Camille had just taken a sip of watered-down *mulsum*, when a handsome stranger grabbed her glass and downed the rest.

"Excuse me!" she exclaimed. The party drowned out her words, but Lucanis could still read her lips. "That's my drink."

Illario simply smiled. "Guess I'll have to buy you another."

Lucanis groaned—not only at the line, but that it worked. Even from his position, he could see Camille was hooked. He shouldn't be surprised. This was old hat for Illario. But it was always amazing to see what one man's smile could accomplish.

Camille blushed and leaned toward Illario. Seizing on the opening, he reached around to wave down a passing waiter—and lifted the key ring hidden in her dress. When the waiter presented the couple with a tray of drinks, Illario discreetly swapped the keys for two glasses of *mulsum*. The waiter sped away, both he and Camille none the wiser.

Keeping low, Lucanis jumped to his feet and followed the tray. He needed to swipe the keys before the waiter reached the kitchen, which, judging from the speed of his steps, the man was keen to do.

Couldn't've just held on to them, could you, cousin? Lucanis thought as he scurried across the slick roof tiles.

The balls of his feet arched inward, searching for traction. *Keep moving*, he told himself. Right now, momentum was his only friend.

The waiter continued to hasten through the crowd. Lucanis's stomach tensed as disembodied hands stretched from the throng to snatch the

remaining glasses. Luckily, no one seemed to notice the tray's stowaway.

Up ahead, Lucanis spied the servants' entrance. If he could reach it, there was just enough space to wedge his body into the covered niche above the door. Not easily, of course, but nothing ever was. He increased his speed to a run, trusting the music and general noise from the party to mask his footfalls. His eyes darted left and right. No one had spotted him yet, but if he missed this jump, he'd have everyone's attention.

Don't think about it. Lucanis took a deep breath and flung himself off the roof.

Suspended in air, time seemed to slow. The only sound that registered was the gust of wind rushing past his face. The opposite wall moved toward Lucanis with the weight of a warship on the horizon. Then, his gloved fingers caught the ledge and he felt everything at once. A burning pressure shot through the marrow of his bones and the surrounding muscles screamed as he twisted his torso to keep from slamming into the wall. Casting his momentum backward then forward again, he swung up into a plank position across the columns framing the servants' entrance.

Two minutes later, the waiter passed below, holding the tray and key ring aloft, ripe for the plucking. Lucanis relieved the man of his burden, then climbed back up to the roof and dashed toward the door Ambrose had disappeared through.

Now, the hard part.

* * *

Lucanis greeted the guard on the other side of the door with a dagger to the throat. He covered his mouth to muffle the gurgling noise, then dragged the body behind one of the curtains covering the windows.

Lucanis thought about securing the entrance—leaving it unlocked could raise suspicion—but chose not to in case Illario decided to work tonight. He could already hear his cousin's honeyed excuses—*But seducing a beautiful woman* is *work!* He snorted and pushed farther inside.

The cold opulence of the place reminded Lucanis of a Chantry rather than a home. Atlases bearing the visages of past Archons held up vaulted ceilings glittering with mosaic depictions of Tevinter's golden age. The cost of such a commission must have been astronomical—both in coin and lives.

How many slaves had gone blind gilding each individual tile?

How many backs had been broken from hauling and placing stone after stone?

There was patriotism and there was obsession. Neither was worth it.

The only part of the mansion's interior design Lucanis did appreciate was the abundance of pointed lines and edges, which made scaling walls a cinch. Hopping from one stone Archon to the next, he moved down the curved hall. He hadn't seen where Ambrose had gone, but he had a fast rule when hunting Venatori: *Follow the headache*.

Sure enough, at the end of the hall, he spotted eight guards: Ambrose's retinue. One duo watched the adjoining corridor, while another patrolled the center. Two were posted at the windows and the last pair flanked an imposing studded door.

Lucanis gritted his teeth as the scraping inside his skull intensified. Every instinct in his body told him that Ambrose was behind that door.

But first, he had to deal with the guards.

The two on patrol passed underneath. Both men were solidly built with scars peeping from their uniform collars. Each carried a sword and a dagger.

Reaching into his jacket pocket, Lucanis retrieved a long spool of wire attached to two wooden grips. He backtracked across the Archon heads and waited for the guards to round the corner.

Measuring out a decent length of wire, Lucanis spun the garrote then whipped it down around the first guard's neck.

One for silence.

The man lurched into the air as Lucanis used his weight as leverage to glide down onto the second guard's shoulders.

Two for surprise.

Tucking his ankle underneath his left knee, Lucanis held one man in a stranglehold, while the other dangled overhead, his feet kicking wildly. The second guard's fists beat against Lucanis's shins. He elbowed him in response, jerking the suspended guard up and down until his legs went rag-doll slack. The second guard continued to fight, but his strength was fading. Lucanis tightened his grip and twisted until he heard the guard's neck crack.

"Pallus? Everything all right?"

Wrapping the end of the garrote around the second guard's broken neck, Lucanis somersaulted backward. The dead weight of the first man

pulled the second one up until they both hung around the limestone Archon's nape like a loose cravat.

"Better check it out," another guard said. Their exchange was followed by the sound of tentative footsteps.

Lucanis sunk back into the shadows and ascended the column once more. Across his chest, a leather strap held four throwing knives. He grabbed two in anticipation.

The steps grew louder. Eight feet. Four guards. That left the two at the door.

"Pallus. We told you. No pranks tonight."

"Not with the Crows circling."

Even without the uniforms, the guards could've been related. They all possessed the same hard brow and flat, broken nose that hadn't been set correctly.

"Maybe they went for a piss?"

"They know better than to leave their post."

Spread out. Lucanis mouthed the words as the guard gave the order. They created a wedge formation with one in the lead and three taking up the rear.

Aiming carefully, Lucanis let loose one of the throwing knifes.

Three for good measure.

It sliced through its target's spine with clean precision. The guard slumped into his partner's shoulder. He turned.

"What the—" A squishy thud interrupted him. He glanced down to find a knife in his heart and joined the other guard on the floor.

Four's exercise.

The formation broke.

"He's here! The Crow's here!"

Another pair from Ambrose's retinue rushed around the corner. Flicking his wrists, Lucanis produced a stiletto dagger from each sleeve and dropped down on the reinforcements. The violence of the fall drove the pointed blades into their skulls with ease.

Five for a slaughter.

Six for the thrill.

The remaining guards stood back to back, staring at him as if he were death itself. Lucanis unsheathed his sword.

After a few shaky breaths, they yelled and charged toward him. He parried the first guard's blow, then slid behind the second and severed his

hamstring.

Seven means more sovereigns.

Twirling back into a standing position, he decapitated the kneeling man with one powerful swing.

"Shit," the last guard stammered, his boots inching backward. "Shit!" He ran.

Lucanis went for his throwing knives, when a steel blade whirled past his head to land in the guard's back, dropping him like a stone.

"Eight marks the final kill," Illario said, coming to stand next to him. He dusted off his palms. "Do you still recite that old nursery rhyme? The one Caterina made us memorize during training?"

Lucanis moved to retrieve his throwing knives. "What can I say? It's catchy."

"That's a word for it." Illario glanced at the swaying guards overhead. "You know, if the Vints ever learn to look up, you're screwed."

"They'd have to stop looking down their noses." He narrowed his eyes. "Your tunic's rumpled."

Illario flashed a sheepish grin. "You weren't the only one tussling with guards."

"Tussling, huh?" Lucanis shook his head. "*That's* a word for it."

"I'm happy to kiss and tell, but shouldn't we do something about this?" Illario wrinkled his nose and nodded toward the sticky fluid seeping out from underneath the slain guards.

Lucanis wiped his blade clean and advanced toward the studded door. "Leave it."

"What? Out in the open?"

"You bring a mop?"

Illario glowered at him. "No, but you've half an armory stored in that coat. I thought maybe—" Both men froze.

At the end of the hall, an elven woman gaped. She was a collection of bones covered in dry, flaky skin and a shaved head. The chains around her wrists and ankles marked her as one of the Wigmaker's slaves.

The linens she had been carrying tumbled to the ground in a heap.

Illario cursed. "Bad timing, *mia cara*."

The woman trembled. She was so thin, the grooves in her joints were clearly visible.

"Please," she begged. Lucanis arched a brow.

Her voice was young. He approached with leisurely steps.

"Please," she repeated, her tone growing panicked. "I didn't—I won't —"

"Shhh," Lucanis murmured. "How old are you?"

She blinked, thinking for a moment, then admitted, "I don't know."

"What about your name?"

"Effe."

The pores on Effe's scalp were an angry red as if her hair had been torn from the root. "Did *he* do that?" Lucanis asked, pointing.

She instinctively reached up to touch the irritated skin. "I had split ends. Master doesn't like split ends."

Lucanis made a fist to quell the rage growing within him. He leaned over to pick up the fallen linens. "Go back the way you came."

"She's seen our faces," Illario hissed.

Lucanis stared into Effe's wide, wondering eyes. Despite her fear, she didn't look away. "No, she hasn't." He handed her the linens. "Have you?"

She shook her head. Lucanis nodded for her to leave.

Effe took a couple of steps backward, then bit her lip. "You're the Crow, aren't you? The one sent to kill my master?"

"I am," Lucanis replied, his tone matter-of-fact.

Illario swore under his breath. "Tell her everything, why don't you?"

"Have you done it yet?" Effe asked, growing tense.

"No."

"Will you?"

"Yes."

She closed her eyes and clasped the linens to her chest. "Good."

"You want him dead?" Illario asked, puzzled. "Why? Your next master could be worse."

Effe pointed toward the studded door, her expression cold. "You'll see."

***

Lucanis flipped through the keys until he found one large enough to match the door's iron lock.

"Never known you to have a soft heart," Illario muttered.

Lucanis's right cheek muscle twitched. "She won't talk."

"This isn't Antiva. We're not heroes here."

"We're not heroes anywhere, cousin."

Illario rolled his eyes. “You know what I mean. The Venatori already have your name. If they learn your face—”

“I’ll grow a beard.” Lucanis smirked. “They’ll never see me coming.”

Illario’s frustration deflated. He grinned reluctantly. “That cavalier attitude’s going to get you killed.”

Lucanis turned the key until the bolt unlatched. “It’s served me well so far.”

Securing the grip on his sword, he eased the door open and peeked inside. There was nothing but darkness and stale air.

Lucanis gestured for Illario to follow as he slipped through the entryway.

They stood for a moment, quiet and still, allowing their eyes to adjust. Ten paces ahead, a stairwell materialized in the shadows. Their descent was slow going. Wrought iron made for easy creaks and groans. Each step was a test of patience—and balance. Lucanis went first, showing Illario where to place his feet. Despite their descent underground, the temperature was rising. At the bottom, an arched entryway emitted a red glow that bled onto knobby cobblestones. The light should’ve been refreshing in the dark, but Lucanis had visited enough bad places to know he wasn’t going to like this room.

And he didn’t.

Row after row, men and women were chained to the ceiling in a tidy formation. Their heads lulled forward between straining shoulders. Cascades of hair tumbled past amputated knees to settle in pools of silver, black, gold, and copper. A shiny, terrible rainbow of hair.

Lucanis approached the first row. Up close, he noticed their skin had turned an ash gray and was spotted with crystalized sores. Gently, he pushed the hair from one of their faces. The man’s mouth was sewn shut, his eyes milky. He twisted toward Lucanis.

All at once, the room became aware strangers were present. One by one, they moaned a horrifying chorus of despair.

Lucanis stumbled back, his mouth dry. Something inside snapped. *Death’s too good for this bastard.*

Illario touched his arm. Only then did Lucanis realize how quickly he was breathing. He closed his eyes. *Remember your training*, he told himself, and suddenly, he could hear the tapping of his grandmother’s cane, the hard elegance of her voice. *There is no place for emotion in killing. It’s sloppy. File it down. Make it useful.*

Make it useful, he repeated to himself. With slow, controlled breaths, Lucanis flushed the rage pumping through his veins until he could think clearly. Ambrose would die—that was certain—but he couldn't walk away from these people.

He returned to the man's side and reached for the irons around his wrists.

"What are you doing?" Illario whispered.

"Breaking their shackles."

Illario stared. "That's not the job."

"Fuck the job."

From the back of the chamber, a humming joined the melodious wails. Lucanis peered into the gloom, but the source was too far to see. He locked eyes with Illario and jerked his thumb toward the sound. Weaving among the pendulous bodies, they crept closer.

The moans grew louder.

Lucanis did he best to avoid brushing against the clammy limbs, but the prisoners were packed in tight. Finally, through the forest of undulating torsos, he could discern a figure hunched over in the dark.

"You're lively tonight, my lovelies," Ambrose said, taking a pair of shears in hand. On his desk, a collection of gleaming combs, hackles, and needles were meticulously organized in glass containers. "Do you wish to join the party?"

Rising on his tiptoes, he unchained one of the prisoners to sit him in a chair next to the work station. "All in good time," the Wigmaker promised.

The prisoner stared ahead, his elongated arms limp and atrophied. Both shoulders jutted forward at a cruel angle, stretching the bruised skin. Lucanis knew from experience that they were dislocated.

After donning a set of leather gloves, the Wigmaker opened one of the desk's drawers. The chamber's soft glow became a brilliant vermilion. Lucanis craned his neck to see Ambrose retrieve pebble-size chunks of red lyrium.

Shit.

Ambrose resumed his mellow tune. Using a basalt mortar and pestle, he ground the lyrium into a powder. Once he was satisfied with the consistency, he poured the contents into a goblet of wine. Pivoting back toward the prisoner, Ambrose snipped the knot at the corner of his

mouth and unlaced the thread binding his lips. His jaw fell open with a raspy wheeze.

"Drink up, my dear," the Wigmaker whispered, tipping the prisoner's head back. A grin spread across his face as he watched the man's throat work down the liquid.

Lucanis thought he'd forgotten what fear felt like, but its cold embrace was easily recognizable. He remembered the models with their dead eyes, how the wigs seemed to be alive with magic. Red lyrium would explain why the Veil was so thin, and yet . . .

He glanced around at the bodies filled with anguish and suffering. This place should be a hotbed for demons. How was Ambrose keeping them at bay?

Think, damn it. Lucanis racked his mind. There were rumors of elven artifacts that strengthened the Veil and prevented demons from breaking through. Perhaps Ambrose had acquired one?

He surveyed the room, searching for something, *anything* that might provide a barrier against the spirit world. But there was nothing except for hair, bodies, and the Wigmaker's workstation. Then, Illario's words came to mind . . .

If the Vints ever learn to look up, you're screwed.

His gaze lifted. In the center of the chamber, a small cage hung from the ceiling. Inside was a globe crackling with green energy.

Warm satisfaction spread through him. *Gotcha*.

Meanwhile, Ambrose had redressed the prisoner's mouth and was fastening his shackles. "I'm afraid the rest of you will have to wait. I don't care what Camille says, I'm not missing the show's finale." He brought a lock of hair to his nose and inhaled deeply. "I've worked too hard."

To his right, Lucanis sensed Illario readying his dagger. He gently grabbed his cousin's wrist and shook his head. Illario gawked at him, his jaw clenched.

The Wigmaker began the walk back toward the stairs. A groaning lament followed as he passed.

When he was close enough to touch, Illario tensed—as if to lunge forward. Lucanis tightened his hold, his thumb finding the pressure point at the base of his wrist. The dagger fell from Illario's grasp. Lucanis swiped it up before it clanged to the ground.

What are you doing? Illario mouthed. Again, Lucanis motioned him to stand down.

Once they heard Ambrose climb the stairs and close the door, Illario wrenched his arm free. “Have you lost your mind? We had him!”

“He doesn’t deserve a quick death.”

“Did you forget the mess you left upstairs? What do you think will happen when Ambrose finds his bodyguards slaughtered?”

“Hopefully he panics. I want him scared.”

“He’ll flee,” Illario asserted. “And this contract will be forfeit. *Your life* will be forfeit.”

“Ambrose would never leave his ‘creations.’” Lucanis appraised the brutality that surrounded them. “Don’t worry, cousin. He’ll die. But in the right way.”

Illario threw his hands up. “Death is death! There’s still time to chase Ambrose down. But we need to leave. *Now*. Magic isn’t my forte, but even I know red lyrium is bad news. It infects people’s minds. Lucanis!” Illario pressed. “We can’t help these people.”

Lucanis looked up at the caged globe. “No, but we can give them vengeance.”

After placing Illario’s dagger between his teeth, Lucanis jumped high to seize the bottom rungs of the cage. The chain swiveled from the added weight but held strong. He pulled himself up. There was just enough space between the bars to reach inside.

“What are you doing?” Illario called out.

Lucanis took the dagger from his mouth and positioned it over the artifact. “You’ll see.”

Illario groaned. “I really wish people would stop saying that.”

Breathing deep, Lucanis plunged the dagger into the globe. The strength of the stone ricocheted up through the joints of his arm. He watched the green light sputter and fizzle.

There was a moment of silence, then . . .

Madness.

***

“Seriously, what did you do?” Illario yelled as they raced up the stairs, a cacophony of twisting bones and snapping shackles at their heels.

“That globe was keeping the Veil intact,” Lucanis explained, taking two steps at a time.

“So, you *stabbed* it!?”

"You said yourself, vengeance was the best I could offer."

"No!" Illario retorted, his breath heavy from exertion. "My exact words were: 'We can't help these people.' I said nothing of vengeance. You're the vengeancey one."

They neared the top of the stairs. Lucanis used the railing to propel himself forward. "Trust me—to Ambrose, turning his creations against him is a fate worse than death."

"I'm sorry—did the contract ask for 'a fate worse than death'? Usually, it's just death."

"Illario—" But the other Crow wasn't finished.

"I thought the plan was to have a few laughs, slit some throats—not release a demon swarm!"

"Plans change," Lucanis replied. His gloved palm covered the door handle.

"Well, for the record, I preferred the other one."

"Noted." He went to yank the door open, then hesitated. "Do you hear that?"

Illario's legs bounced impatiently. "The demons? Yes, I hear them."

Lucanis shook his head. "There's no alarm. Ambrose should've found the bodies by now."

Illario tilted his head, then shrugged. "Don't question the Maker's miracles, cousin."

Lucanis moved his ear closer to the door's studded surface.

Swirling water. Soapsuds bubbled and popped. A loud *slap* echoed as drenched fabric hit marble.

A mop?

He opened the door. The hall was empty. Lucanis tossed Illario his dagger, then readied his own. Cautiously, they ventured forth.

With tense muscles, they rounded the corner. The guards' corpses were gone. In their place, they found Effe cleaning the floor.

When she saw Lucanis, her knuckles turned white. "You said you'd kill him."

Lucanis motioned Illario to lower his weapon. "It's all right."

"It's not!" Her voice quavered. "Master just passed this way. If he finds out I helped you, he'll—"

"He won't," Lucanis promised.

"Where are the bodies?" Illario asked.

Effe shrank into herself. "I moved them."

"Not by yourself, you didn't." He turned to Lucanis, a smug sneer on his face. "I told you she'd talk."

"Only to the other slaves! Please," she pleaded to Lucanis. "I didn't tell them what you looked like—only that you're here. They wanted to help." She squared her slight shoulders. "You promised to kill him."

"And you promised to keep your mouth shut," Illario chided.

Back down the hall, something wet slammed against the studded door.

Effe's bravado crumbled. "What was that?"

"Take her," Lucanis told Illario. "Find the others."

"Other what?" His eyes darted to the elf. "*Slaves?* Absolutely not."

Behind them, a second fleshy thud echoed, then a third, and a fourth.

Lucanis continued as if Illario had agreed, "There's a statue with a passage—like the one we used before. It's not far. You should be able to escape in the chaos."

Illario blanched. "Did you not hear me? I said—"

"Athima will help you. She's the elf we met earlier."

"I don't give a damn what her name is. I'm not—"

"Once Ambrose is dealt with, I'll meet you at the docks."

"Lucanis!" Illario shouted. "We are not revolutionaries."

Lucanis inhaled, his nostrils flaring. Illario was right. The Antivan Crows were assassins not freedom fighters. Back home, people liked to romanticize, but Lucanis knew what he was.

Still, his fingers twitched. "They are not responsible for their master's mistakes."

He locked eyes with his cousin. Illario tried to remain resolute, but it was like touching hot steel. Sighing, he cursed and turned to Effe.

"Come on," Illario snapped.

She glanced toward Lucanis. He gave her a reassuring nod. "My cousin may be a snob, but he's true to his word."

"Are *you?*" she asked, referring to his promise about Ambrose.

"The Wigmaker will die tonight," Lucanis affirmed. "But you have to go. It's about to become very dangerous."

As if to prove his point, someone outside screamed.

***

The scene in the courtyard had changed dramatically, but if Lucanis was being honest, he preferred chaos to debauchery. It gave him satisfaction to watch drunken Vints trip over themselves, desperate to find an exit. Wine and blue blood spilled in equal measure as guests careened through an obstacle course of upturned chaise lounges and broken glass.

The demons had possessed the models first, the red lyrium–imbued wigs an enticing lure. Their bony bodies stretched into towering masses of contorted flesh. The transformation affected the wigs, too, giving the locks a serrated edge. Strands stuck out at odd angles, whipping wildly, cutting anyone who drew too close.

For mages, fear was an open invitation to demonic possession, and the alcohol the guests had consumed had dulled their defenses. One after another, the drunkest and most frightened among them fell prey to malicious spirits watching, waiting on the other side of the Veil.

Lucanis felt no sympathy. They were, all of them, Venatori supporters, who either knew what Ambrose was doing or chose to turn a blind eye to indulge their own vanity.

Ignorance is bliss, not innocence.

He spotted Ambrose Forfex at the center of the carnage, surrounded by a gleaming pile of hair. The Wigmaker was shouting at Camille to cut his wigs off the abominations. Her painted arms were getting sliced to ribbons for her efforts.

Growing impatient, Ambrose snarled, "Get out of the way." He shoved the guard captain. Her ankle, unaccustomed to heels, twisted and snapped. Camille fell forward, toward one of the abominations. An errant lock of hair caught her throat. The gash was thin but deep. With frantic fingers, she tried to apply pressure. She looked to Ambrose and extended a pleading hand.

The mage rolled his eyes. "Useless."

Ambrose grabbed her wrist and pulled the pressure off her neck, allowing the blood to flow freely. "*This*, however . . ."

The guard captain collapsed at his feet. Employing Camille's blood as a catalyst, the Wigmaker impaled the abomination with spikes of crimson energy. The monstrous corpse exploded when it hit the ground, but Ambrose had enough foresight to create a barrier, shielding himself from the gore. The Wigmaker leaned over to lift a stringy tangle of hair from the grisly pile.

Lucanis dropped onto the runway. His sword arm limber with anticipation, he stalked toward Ambrose. "Nothing a little soap can't fix," he offered.

Ambrose threw down the matted mess. "Lucanis Dellamorte, I presume?"

"Sì," Lucanis answered, knowing even a single syllable of a foreign language would disgust the Wigmaker.

It had the desired effect—Ambrose recoiled as if he'd stepped in urine.

"Is this your handiwork?"

"Sì."

The mage's jaw pulsed. "You think you can come into my Imperium and act as judge and executioner?" Lucanis opened his mouth to respond, but Ambrose anticipated his answer. "*Don't* say, '*Sì!*'"

That earned a genuine smile from Lucanis. "Normally, there's no judgment—only a contract. But for you, Ambrose, I made an exception."

The Wigmaker raised a brow. "Oh? What makes me so special?"

"You upset my delicate sensibilities."

It was Ambrose's turn to laugh. "I thought a Crow could stomach anything—for the right price."

Lucanis leveled the Wigmaker with a pointed look. "Not red lyrium."

"Morality is not static. Right and wrong are a matter of perspective." Ambrose's words were practiced and tired as if he had given the same reasoning a hundred times.

Lucanis continued his advance, refusing to engage in the Wigmaker's rhetoric. Nothing irritated him more than self-righteous excuses. *If you're going to do something terrible, just own it.*

The abominations from the workshop had joined the party. One of them seized a fleeing guard. He screamed as it wrapped him in a cocoon of razor-sharp hair. Blood oozed from the coiled strands.

Ambrose shot a quick glance at Camille's corpse. The gesture lasted only a split second, but it was enough to prompt Lucanis to increase his pace. *Close the distance. Don't let him get a spell off.*

Chanting under his breath, the Wigmaker began summoning a bloody mist from the guard captain's remains. The lifeless skin paled and shriveled.

Lucanis broke into a run.

The mist sharpened into a thousand tiny needles. Ambrose raised his arm.

Not gonna make it, Lucanis thought, snatching a knife from his coat.

The needles vibrated eagerly. Just as the Wigmaker launched them forward, Lucanis threw his knife—taking off four of Ambrose's fingers.

Without a mage to guide them, the needles transformed back into globules of blood and rained down on the catwalk.

Ambrose, clutching his ruined hand, crumbled to his knees.

"You should be more careful," Lucanis said. "Fingers are a wigmaker's tools, are they not?"

Hopelessness flooded the mage's eyes. "One day, someone will turn your work against you. Only then will you have some semblance of the emptiness you've made me feel." With his good hand, he gathered what was left of the wigs, hugging the locks to his chest.

Lucanis experienced a twinge of disappointment, kindling for rage. He expected more fight from a high-ranking Venatori. He thought of the Wigmaker's workshop, of the prisoners, their bellies full of poison, hanging like butchered pigs in stale, suffocating darkness.

"Get up, Ambrose," he growled. "You don't get to do that—you don't get to quit."

The word *quit* sparked some life in the Wigmaker's blank expression. "So, the crow thinks he can best the dragon?"

"*The crow*," Lucanis mocked, "knows it."

A cackle, distorted and unhinged, erupted from Ambrose's lips. The hair in his fist glowed, and Lucanis swore he heard the strands whisper.

"I'll make you eat those words!" Ambrose promised, his voice no longer his own.

Lucanis watched, repulsed, as the Wigmaker began shoving locks of hair into his mouth. The sharp edges shredded his tongue and gums, but he continued stuffing, chewing, and eating until the bottom half of his face was ground meat.

That's one way to make a point, Lucanis thought, coming to a stop.

Gnarled cords of muscle ripped the seams of the Wigmaker's clothing. Cartilage tore. Vertebrae popped. Ambrose held his pulsing, distended scalp. Strands of hair cut through the skin, lashing out like a sea monster. Lucanis had seen many abominations, but never one like this. It was almost arachnid in shape with eight segments of spiky hair

forming the legs and Ambrose's twisted, mutated body making up the abdomen.

"Thought you said dragon not spider!" Lucanis taunted, hoping to distract the beast while he searched for a route to higher ground.

In response, the creature rose to its full height, then slashed at the Crow with its serrated limbs. Lucanis dove sideways, mere seconds before the monster's front legs pierced the runway. This is why you don't talk during a fight, Lucanis scolded himself. Zigging and zagging to avoid the spiked appendages, he sped toward the arched columns. He ducked under another abomination's swiping claws and inhaled a chestful of air before scrambling up the first column, then the second. His fingers had just grazed the final ledge, when a searing pain shot through his right shoulder. Lucanis tried to pull away, but he could feel the hair wrap around his clavicle, yanking him back from the inside.

He lost his grip.

The abomination hurled Lucanis skyward. More legs perforated his hip, bicep, and thigh. Steeling himself against the pain, Lucanis flipped backward and severed the hairy limbs.

He heard an inhuman shriek, and then he was falling.

Lucanis hit the roof with a *smack* powerful enough to fracture the clay tiles and two of his ribs.

Make that three, he noted, rolling onto his back.

Below, the abomination let out a high-pitched wail. Lucanis gritted his teeth and forced himself to peer over the side.

With four of its legs now too short to support its body, the creature struggled to stand. Sensing its weakness and spurred on by the demons of vengeance within, the other abominations began to surround it.

That's it. Lucanis smiled encouragingly. *Good little demons*. Turning his sword over in his palm, he cut across the roof.

The smaller abominations pushed the larger beast into a corner. The creature reared back to swipe at the encroaching swarm, exposing Ambrose's distorted frame. One of the slashed legs constricted around an attacking abomination. Ambrose's mouth opened wide, unhooking its maimed jaw, to swallow the abomination whole.

The legs began to grow back before Lucanis's eyes.

"No, you don't!" he shouted.

Raising his sword overhead, Lucanis leapt off the roof. He could hear the clamoring horde below, but he kept his focus on the creature's

underbelly. Too late, it tried to protect itself. Hundreds of wiry strands whipped through the air, catching only the wind. Lucanis plunged his sword into Ambrose's mangled sternum. He dragged the blade down in one long, clean cut until he ran out of flesh.

For a moment, the abomination wobbled. The fissure in its core festered with inky spume. Then, slowly, the viscous halves split, folding outward. A putrid vapor infected the atmosphere. The locks of hair composing the creature's legs disjoined and frizzed with static.

Panting heavily, Lucanis regarded the creature's collapse without joy or anger. A vermilion fire engulfed the carcass, leaving nothing but a brittle husk.

The other abominations stirred.

"You have your vengeance," Lucanis rasped.

But his words did not reach them. They stared, snarling and ready. He squeezed the grip of his sword, preparing for another fight—then the pressure behind his skull eased. Without the Wigmaker, the demons had no anchor in the waking world. Gradually, the abominations disintegrated into ash. With the source of their anger gone, the spirits of vengeance returned to the Fade, allowing the dead to rest.

Only then did Lucanis exhale and let relief wash over him.

"Contract complete."

* * *

Lucanis reached the docks just before dawn. Knowing Illario as he did, he passed their ship's allotted berth to check the nearby taverns. After a quick glance up and down the harbor, Lucanis settled on the Nug Queen purely because it was the cleanest establishment of the lot.

When he entered, limping and bloody, the barkeep glowered. "Walk out the way you came," the dwarf instructed. He had a tawny mustache that was twirled and waxed at both ends.

"I'm looking for my cousin," Lucanis explained.

"Don't care," the dwarf replied. "I know trouble when I see it. Even if it's not bleeding on my floorboards."

Lucanis scanned the room for Illario. The barkeep's attitude aside, the tavern was inviting with its pristine white walls and peacock-blue cushions. A brass nug, wearing a little crown, reigned over the bar's sparse patrons. Most had turned in for the night, but a few sleepy, sullen

customers remained, staring into their pints for answers or comfort. Not seeing his cousin among them, Lucanis prepared to leave—then he heard Illario's silvery voice flattering one of the waiters.

"Oy!" the dwarf called out as Lucanis staggered toward the row of booths lining the left side of the tavern. "Exit's that way!"

His bellowing drew Illario's attention away from the handsome servant. Upon seeing Lucanis, he jumped to his feet. "Andraste's holy cabbage, you look like shit."

"Get that man to stop yelling at me," Lucanis said. He plopped down in the booth, taking a moment to rest his eyes, while Illario soothed the irate proprietor.

"Drink?" his cousin offered, returning with two glasses and a bottle of wine. "It's expensive."

Lucanis accepted with a faint nod.

"Some say a bribe spoils the vintage," Illario mused while pouring, "but I think it tastes all the sweeter."

"Effe and the others. Did you get them to—"

"Yes, yes," Illario snapped, "I did my good deed for the year."

The two paused to sip their wine. Lucanis rolled the liquid over his tongue. Bribery had not spoiled this bottle, at least.

"Camille didn't make it," he said finally.

"Who?"

"The guard captain."

"Ah," Illario said, nodding in recognition. "Well, that does free me from promises I didn't intend to keep. And Ambrose?"

"You have to ask?"

"Fair enough. That his?" He gestured toward the dark stains on Lucanis's coat.

"Mostly."

His cousin's brows drew together. "Do you need a healer? The ship will have one, but if you can't wait—"

"I'm fine," Lucanis stated.

"All right," Illario said, topping off his glass. "We'll just pretend that's wine you're dripping all over the table."

"What do you want me to say?"

Illario's gaze grew hard. "How long are you going to keep doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"Caterina's bidding."

The wine turned in Lucanis's mouth. "Illario. Stop."

"If I was in charge, you wouldn't have to do this anymore," he cajoled. "You could quit."

Lucanis stared at his cousin. "I don't want to quit."

Illario sat back. The distance between them suddenly felt much wider than a table.

"Even if it kills you," Illario whispered.

"Death is my calling," Lucanis stated, matter-of-fact. "Just as yours is to become First Talon."

He smiled, hoping to ease the tension, but Illario's posture remained taut. "And if Caterina disagrees? If she thinks you're the better man for the job—"

"I don't want it, Illario," Lucanis insisted.

"But you wouldn't refuse."

"It's impossible to refuse Caterina," Lucanis admitted reluctantly. "Only prolong her, until she sees reason."

He knew it wasn't the answer Illario wanted, but it was the truth. And in their line of work, honesty was hard to come by.

Illario exhaled and lifted his wineglass in salute. "To reason, then."

"To reason," Lucanis echoed.

The two Crows clinked the rims of their glasses together, then prepared for the long journey home.

***

Magister Zara Renata stood nude before a gilded full-length mirror. Every morning, she assessed her body, starting with the toes then working her way up to her face. Three slaves, each bearing a smaller looking glass, stood on either side and at her back so that there were no blind spots. They stared, unblinking, at her lustrous bronze skin. Looking at anything other than their mistress risked a punishment most severe.

There was a knock at the door. Normally, Zara would not tolerate an interruption during her morning regimen, but she had been looking forward to this particular visit.

"Enter," she instructed, glancing over her shoulder to admire the curve of her lower back.

"Crispin Kavlo and Felicia Erimond, mistress," a perfumed beauty announced. No one in Zara's household looked a day over thirty-five.

The two guests undoubtedly noticed their host's nakedness but kept their expressions neutral.

"I take it Ambrose didn't listen," Zara began without ceremony.

"We advised him to cancel the show," Crispin replied.

"He refused," Felicia added.

"*Artists*," Zara bemoaned. "Always prioritizing their work over what really matters."

Turning in the light, she noticed a faint stretch mark on her hip. Zara snapped at one of the slaves to extend her arm. She did so without hesitation. Reaching back, Zara removed a pointed hairpin from the bountiful bun at her neck. She handed it to the slave, who dutifully pierced her palm with the sharp tip. Squeezing her hand shut, the slave dripped blood onto her mistress's hip. Zara murmured a quick spell. When the slave wiped her skin clean, the offending blemish was gone.

"How many dead?" she asked.

"The body count is ongoing."

"A simple estimate, please."

"Around forty, including Ambrose."

Zara's brows rose. "My, my. All the work of one Crow?"

"We believe he had assistance, but yes." Felicia nodded gravely. "Lucanis Dellamorte is responsible."

Crispin licked his lips. "We won't be able to keep this one from the public." He and Felicia exchanged a nervous glance. "They're already calling him 'the Demon.'"

"From flying vermin to malicious spirit. That's quite the promotion." With a ribbon, Zara measured the width of her waist. The corner of her mouth ticked upward at the result.

"We have reason to believe you could be his next target," Felicia said.

"Your place in the Magisterium puts you at risk," Crispin elaborated, his tone rushed.

"Worried for me, Crispin?" Zara asked. The younger man reddened, but she noticed he didn't deny it. "Don't be. I'm not a fool like Ambrose. A true maleficar knows demons cannot be killed, only controlled. If this Crow fancies himself a demon, then I look forward to using him to his full potential."

"How?" Crispin asked.

“Never underestimate the power of observation,” Zara lectured. “I’ll keep a low profile. That should entice him to move on to more exciting prey.”

“But he’ll continue killing Venatori,” Felicia pointed out.

“For which he’ll be duly punished. In the meantime, we practice patience.” Zara paused to marvel at herself. Every feature and proportion were in perfect symmetry. And yet, when she smiled, there was something ugly behind it. “Freeing Ambrose’s slaves already tells us this Crow has a heart. He will reveal other flaws. And we will exploit every last one of them.”

GENITIVI DIES IN THE END

LUKAS KRISTJANSON

The Fen Harel question. How many lives had ended seeking an answer? Four more, if our turn chasing a legend fails tonight. But we've dragged truth from the darkness beneath Tevinter, found pages that will guide tomorrow's righteous hands. And if our flight dies at the tip of an Antaam spear, make certain that more than the Silent Plains will know what we have found—

"Oh, child."

Philliam, a Bard! Looked up from his notes. Brother Genitivi, peer and rival, stared at him with red-ringed eyes. An arrow in the old man's chest bobbed in time with his breathing, growing ever more haggard. Blood dripped from the fletching, which was very odd, thought Philliam. And as his world turned sideways, formerly Sister Laudine tore the world with a scream.

***

"That is how you *start* it?"

"People have to know the stakes."

"They want to save the world, they know the stakes."

"Old man, will you let me work?"

"I *will* stab both of you."

"Fine, I'll just . . . start at the beginning."

***

Philliam, a Bard! was sitting in a café in Val Royeaux. It was three in the afternoon, an hour past too hot. He'd just stopped listening to his publisher, although the latter's complaints about lagging sales would continue well into the digestif. That was half of the problem, thought Philliam—he preferred people who went for drinks, not stayed for digestifs.

He was a stark contrast to the formal wealth of his lunch partner: Free Marcher features too many cousins from nobility to matter; mousy hair, boyishly unkempt, and a lean frame dressed in stylishly functional cuir bouilli armor. Legitimate kit, though his pouches held notebooks and inks, not a soldier's fare. They'd eye him suspiciously in an honest guildhall, but he wouldn't be laughed out. Philliam dressed—and wrote—for the people.

But he did his duty, despite the company he'd rather keep, remaining carefully in line with his host's pointed words and matching finger. He knew how to fill space when money talked.

"Whiff and whaff, trends of the day," came the standard complaint. But if you chased trends, countered Philliam in his head, you were, by definition, *behind*. "Ahem hem, lose 'a Bard!' from the name." Another favorite, and nonstarter; his fans loved the notoriety the title implied. "Such and such-not, expedition beneath the Imperium—"

Philliam choked on his ale. This wasn't part of the standard lunch package, and he found himself scrambling back into the conversation.

"Lord Varondale, I must have misheard," he said. "You're asking me to go where?"

"Oh, I'm not asking," said the noble, his smile as fixed as the Orlesian half-mask he wore. Bold ceramic and gold filigree showed his status as a new name with equally new money. He tipped a small glass to his lips, taking only enough liquid to moisten an insult. "You've promised relevance for years, and I've happily defended you. But abridging your betters can only get you so far." He leaned forward, tapping a gold pinky ring on the table. "The time has come to put up . . . and shut up."

He slid a vellum scroll across the table. Philliam didn't take it.

"Those are Inquisition seals," said Philliam. "There is no Inquisition. Not anymore."

"Special commission."

"By who?"

"Inner circle."

"Of what?"

"The society of your continued employment," said the noble, his tone growing impatient. "Read it."

Philliam rolled the scroll out between them. His eyes widened.

The document outlined an expedition that seemed fantastical. It included a strange assemblage of fragments, a collection of lore one might find in a conspiratorial basement. Philliam pictured them as pins spread across a map, with red strings noting connections between distant astrariums. And he *could* see the promise. To his eyes, the lines indirectly suggested a location, perhaps in the north of the Silent Plains. He had a gift for spotting the notable parts of greater, grinding works. He'd made his living at it. That appeared to be why the offer was in his hands.

And he'd heard the stories.

The Inquisition was ended not by invasion or Chantry order. It fell within a mirror, past a mysterious Crossroads, in the shadow of something impossible—the Dread Wolf, a creature so powerful the elves once called him a god. The Chantry didn't want him to exist—the Maker didn't allow room for gods that weren't God—but if he did, whatever he was, they needed information. There were apparently spaces between that Crossroads and the Fade—broken spaces that weren't all there. Which meant pieces might be somewhere else. And a certain type of mind might follow that backward, and find what had undone this elf, and any others, that walked as gods.

"You want me to find the true history of the elven pantheon, in a piece of a library that doesn't exist, beneath the Imperium, deeper than the Deep Roads?" Philliam tossed the scroll back to his publisher. "I don't do fiction."

His host started to laugh, and then didn't.

"You haven't done *anything* for a quarter. This represents several opportunities. For me, repayment of the advance you owe me. For you, an original story of your own, not a retelling." Lord Varondale took another slow sip of his drink. "It is also," he added with a stark earnestness, "a chance to help."

Philliam knew the Varondales had invested with the Inquisition. He'd never have guessed their intentions had been genuine.

"This is real?"

"That's what you and certain colleagues are invited to find out."

Philliam squinted. "Who else got this 'invitation'?"

"Hello," said a voice Orlais had come to love and dread, like truth at a family reunion.

Philliam cringed.

Formerly Sister Laudine, ex of the Chantry, documenter of all things sensual and denied in otherwise falsely prim Orlais. It was, frankly, a brand Philliam wished he'd thought of. His promise of "Bard!" demanded a competency in things both dangerous and political. Her title had transgression built in. And really, how daring did a former celibate and scholar really need to be?

Chantry service was a lifelong calling. Those who left *voluntarily* usually did so because of age or infirmity. Laudine was young—late twenties—and while she no longer dressed the part, like her title, she kept deliberate echoes. The choice of fabrics. The manner of stitching. She flaunted who she had been, implying scandal, provoking questions. It lent weight to her writing.

Today her long blond hair fell from a tightly pinned crown braid, and her robes were a muted gold trimmed in a shock of red. Both were styled for travel.

"You're looking well," said Laudine, her eyes sweeping past Philliam to evaluate Lord Varondale's drakeskin tunic and his taste in spirits. She pursed her face slightly, as though his look was sour and his drink was loud.

Philliam knew that appraisal. Laudin's senses often swapped color, taste, and sound. A quirk of perception that gave her insights about character, something she had confided while evaluating his. They shared a past that meant they occasionally slept together, although they both agreed they wouldn't share a future. They fought as much as they intertwined, and it showed in their prose. They were peers in many ways, but she said he was "green," and he couldn't shake the feeling that he'd been found wanting.

That was *also* her brand.

"You of course know each other." Lord Varondale smiled.

"Intimately," said Laudine.

Philliam grumbled into a half-empty glass.

"I made some initial corrections," said Laudine, gesturing at the scroll. "We should alter our search accordingly."

Of course, thought Philliam. Translation.

Ancient elven is much about rhythm and feeling as vocabulary, and Laudine's affinity for it had earned one of her earliest censures while still a Chantry sister. She'd intuited that a clay fragment—previously claimed to be proof of elven belief in "the Maker's flowering glory"—was, in fact, a manual of marital instruction. The piece was still in Mother Hevara's sealed vault, although privately examined on special occasions.

"Wonderful," said Lord Varondale. "I've secured you a delver for the underground bits. Which, I believe, will be most of it."

"You're not coming?" said Philliam.

"Goodness no, this is entirely a writers' retreat."

"Has he not told you?" Laudine smirked.

Philliam shot his publisher an accusing glare. To his surprise, the man flinched.

"You see, Philliam, the request was very specific." Lord Varondale downed the last of his drink. "This particular trail needs equally particular skills. A big-picture sensationalist, that's you. A sensualist, our former sister—"

Laudine nodded demurely.

"And?" said Philliam.

"There are many details unknown," he said, standing to leave. "You need a certain breadth of religious and geographical documentation."

"And?" Philliam repeated, his hand at his temple.

"A detail-minded scholar—"

Philliam knew the name before he felt the sting. Five hundred and thirty-six pages of leather-bound Ferelden heraldic history—not including epigraphs and appendices—slapped across his face. It was a book he'd reduced to a twenty-page collection of cautionary-yet-enticing executions.

"Thief!" yelled Brother Ferdinand Genitivi, honored Chantry scholar and respected historian, on the eve of the longest—and last—month of their lives.

***

"Where is the account of the journey?"

"It's not important."

"A storied land of Blight and empire is 'unimportant,' yet you linger on salacious personal details?"

"I'm building tension."

"By sacrificing context."

"Stop arguing and just get it on the page!"

"She has a point, and is wielding one."

"Fine. Have some details."

***

The journey into once-mighty Tevinter was largely uneventful. What would have been a tactical triumph in a previous age was now a matter of following unguarded trade routes. Truth be told, the trickiest part of crossing the Imperium now was knowing when you started. There were multiple border outposts, each a fading marker of the empire's reach at a different point in time.

Their hired driver and delver was a broad-shouldered man called Mateo, one of the famed Rivaini Lords of Fortune. A guild of treasure hunters and dungeoneers, they specialized in pulling gems from the eyes of statues and, for added cost, protecting the softer people who hired them to do so. The Lords wore their expertise, and the sash around Mateo's waist was heavy with ancient coins and other trinkets from beneath the plains. He had a genuine appreciation for history, but didn't claim to know the works of his current charges. Which, all things considered, probably made him the best fit for the expedition.

"Writers argue a lot," he muttered, pulling a starved bush from a stone slab.

"We should've brought the Dowager," said Philliam, sneering at Brother Genitivi while sitting on a jagged rock. He dumped a pebble from his boot. It was wet from broken blisters.

"You could not afford her," Genitivi shot back. The anonymous Randy Dowager routinely outsold all of them with her collections of scarf-fluttering smut. Only Philliam considered this competition.

"I will stab both of you," said Laudine, brandishing a long pin from her hair.

Weeks in a small coach had not gelled their group into a team, despite their surprising effectiveness. Between Genitivi's details, Philliam's links, and Laudine's rhythm, they had written a path that

traveled backward from the strange end of the Inquisition. A tale that upended history, revealing that Arlathan, the ancient elven capital, had not been destroyed by Tevinter, but by the strange magics that caused the rise of the Veil.

The division of the mortal realm from the Fade was not a natural state that had always existed. It was an event, a moment in time that had literally shattered the elven empire. Pieces of that glory now drifted beyond dream and will, with the Dread Wolf stalking between. But other pieces remained, displaced in the physical world. And in the gap between accepted fact and fantastical guesses, there were clues a group of squabbling writers now chased to hidden secrets.

If they didn't kill each other first.

Genitivi had spent his life collecting careful facts, cataloging the glory of the Maker as he crisscrossed the nations of Thedas. He was the epitome of the horseshoe-haired scholar, fingers permanently stained by inky recollections. His tomes were heavy and exhaustive, the pride of many academic institutions. Reverence that was not shared by current company. Philliam had famously earned Genitivi's ire by paraphrasing several of his works and serializing the bloody bits.

Genitivi accused Philliam of denigrating history.

Philliam accused Genitivi of holding it captive from the public.

Laudine thought both had their heads up their arses.

"There's nothing for miles," said Philliam.

"Blame her," said Genitivi, pointing at Laudine. "If we had stayed on the road, we would have markers. Waypoints. A pillar every hundred yards."

The Imperial Highway was an elevated road of gigantic stone slabs, each section held aloft by pillars rising like the arms of a buried giant. It started in Minrathous, and nearly bridged the whole of the Imperium. Magisters of old could march their domain from end to end, looking down upon everything they ruled, in every sense. It was a relic of Tevinter at its height, from a time when the spoils of empire could afford to maintain it. Its polished surface had been the gentlest part of their journey. Leaving it to find their goal had meant hours of searching amid ankle-testing stones and sand.

"There're no relics to be found on the road." Laudine sniffed. "Present company excluded."

“Brace yourselves,” said Mateo. His hand was on a marked stone that only a practiced treasure hunter could have seen amid the scrub.

Philliam had been focused on his next insult. He hadn’t noticed the postholes that ringed the large stone slab beneath them—the remnants of a long-rotted railing. He’d dismissed their flat respite as an offcut of some long disused quarry. Not, as Mateo’s careful eye had spotted, the top of a supply shaft that had served the Deep Roads some millennia before.

“Wait—” he said, as Mateo didn’t.

The stone clicked, and mechanisms long out of alignment dropped them into free fall. They braced, as Mateo had suggested, against the only supports available: each other, their screams a bitter harmony.

“Writers,” muttered Mateo.

***

“That enough context for you?”

“Quite, thank you.”

“Don’t forgot, Mateo was shirtless the entire time.”

“I didn’t find it as impressive as you did.”

“You’re still so very green.”

“Just let me continue. We’re nearly there.”

***

Philliam thought they would return to Orlais as heroes. The journey underground had gone surprisingly well, despite its terrifying start. As the slab had dropped, cables slack with age had found their proper tension. Unseen bellows were pulled closed, and the air pushed by their fall was collected and redirected within the shaft. The descent had ended without injury, if not gently.

Mateo reassured them that it was a dwarven design—or maybe Tevinter—and that regardless of age, he’d only ever heard of one failing. When asked who had survived the two-mile drop to make the report, he had smiled proudly.

“That’s why I know to brace.”

After that, Phillian, Genitivi, and Laudine had jointly decreed that, as they were technically his employers, they should be consulted *before*

any future lever-pulling. But despite his casual bravado, they had to admit the man knew his business. Mateo led them expertly through the Tevinter mine, directing them to a dwarven crosscut, and even daring a rough-hewn tunnel likely clawed by darkspawn during the first or second Blight.

And deeper still they found the impossible.

Natural caves and the occasional support beam suddenly gave way to delicate elven carvings, the stone floor abruptly changing to mahogany hardwood. There was no doorway, no planning or joinery. It was as if a pocket had suddenly formed in the rock, replaced by the notion that shelves and reading desks should simply be there. They had turned a corner and stepped into an elven library. When Arlathan "fell," a piece of it had "fallen" here.

With hunches proven right, Philliam was in his glory, salivating over tomes that had waited centuries—perhaps millennia—for new readers. And better, somewhere in here could be the means to defend the world. Mateo stood guard, Laudine called out symbols and meanings, and Philliam stuffed tomes into a satchel.

Genitivi provided the first low point, interrupting their celebrations as he slumped slowly in a corner, weeping.

"Lies. I have written lies."

He had a book in his hand, one of the tomes Laudine had noted as potentially useful. Its contents would take years to interpret, but the leatherwork on the cover was obvious. It portrayed a landmass recognizably Thedas, but with none of the borders, historical or modern, that he had so carefully cataloged.

"I found the Maker in everything," he said. "At the end of every discovery was His Glory. I thought he led me here as well." Genitivi regarded the book angrily, but gently set it aside, as though his reverence for knowledge would not allow him to throw it. "I thought we would disprove this madness." He stared at the room, his eyes looking just as shattered. "The dust on those shelves is my career," he said. "How much did I ignore? How much is beneath, deliberately hidden by willful blindness?"

For once, Philliam struggled to respond. He'd never devoted himself to anything, but his career had greatly depended on the work of those who had. Especially Genitivi—he was an institution. He couldn't just crumble.

"You never lied," Philliam offered. "Interpreted, perhaps."

Laudine scowled. Philliam cringed, and tried again, kneeling in front of his slumped peer.

"A true scholar wouldn't turn away now," he said. "That's not why the Maker gave you your skills." Philliam picked up the leather-bound tome, fingering the map. "We need you to help make sense of this, whatever the truth." He offered the book back to Genitivi.

Genitivi looked at Philliam.

"Don't leave this to a hack like me," said Philliam.

The old man smiled.

"Trouble," said Mateo, staring into darkness as air from the tunnel gently tossed his long dark hair.

That was the second low point. Someone else descending the shaft, following the easily marked trail they had left. The Antaam arrived soon after.

Philliam thought that was as dour as things could get. He'd never been so wrong in his life, and he never would be again.

***

"Accurate, I suppose, but . . . it feels less convincing now. I am surprised it worked."

"It was sweet in the moment. Very out of character."

"I didn't see *you* helping."

"I do, very shortly."

"Must we revisit this?"

"You wanted detail, old man."

***

Philliam, Laudine, Genitivi, and Mateo were back at the bottom of the supply shaft they had first descended. They were on their knees, their hands at their sides, a spear held at the back of each of their necks.

Their captors were led by a seven-foot gray-skinned statue. She wore leather across her legs and torso, tied with intricate red ropes. Her face and arms were painted with the interlocking symbol of the Antaam, the military third of Qunari society. The paint—vitaar—hardened the skin and was toxic to non-Qunari, meaning her armor was actually the

weaker link in her defense. Her horns curled backward. Her long white hair trailed down her back—free, but still controlled.

"My name," she said, "is Rasaan."

She stepped thoughtfully in a line before them, plying, offering. The group hadn't been mistreated, despite Mateo killing two soldiers during their initial meeting. The questions had started remarkably gentle, almost grateful. Rasaan had apparently followed the same threads they had, but she'd admitted she wouldn't have found the shattered library without them.

Her interest, however, was far more specific than theirs. Rasaan wanted names.

"Fen Harel," she lectured, "is a name given by enemies. Its translation, 'Dread Wolf,' isn't true." She turned, considering one of the tomes now piled on the slab. "The name given when he lied to us—and to your Inquisition—was chosen by a self-styled martyr. 'Solas' is also not true."

"Pride," said Laudine. "It means pride."

Rasaan stopped and cocked an eye. "Very good," she said.

Names were important to the Qunari. They were named for their roles, and roles defined their identities. Their actual birth names were records, lists that identified breeding, ancestry. With this "true name" you could track a person back through the best and worst of themselves. Find flaws. Exploit weaknesses. Know what they had failed to be.

Names appeared to be even more important to Rasaan. Especially names deliberately changed. She wheeled to gesture down the tunnel, to the now nearly empty, strangely displaced room.

"You came here seeking information. As have I. There is no greater advantage than to know an enemy's true name." She turned, smirking. "If only to make them say it."

"We'll let you know what we find," said Philliam, regretting it.

Rasaan regarded him sternly, then smiled.

"You will," she said with certainty.

A soldier approached from behind, and she nodded a command. Books were piled on the stone slab. She turned back to the kneeling four.

"You. Warrior," she said to Mateo. "What is your name?"

"Mateo." He shrugged.

Rasaan regarded him strangely, considering his tone. "I don't think so," she said. "But it's all you know, isn't it?"

Mateo furrowed his brow, but said nothing.

"You. Mouth," she said to Philliam. "What is your name?"

"I go by Philliam," he said, adding "a Bard!" out of reflex.

"Your true name?" said Rasaan, clearly knowing it wasn't.

Philliam started, then paused. He hadn't said his family names in a very long time.

"Philliam Bernard Aloicious Trevelyan."

"It sounds foreign on your tongue," said Rasaan. She leaned in close, whispering, "You may have become what you pretend." She smirked at the smooth image Philliam presented, and it suddenly felt very hollow to him.

"You. Elder," she said to Genitivi.

Genitivi was quick and demanding. "I am Brother Ferdinand Genitivi, emeritus scholar of the University of Val Royeaux, servant of His Glory, and this is not the agreed-upon procedure for the handling of prisoners by treaty of—"

Rasaan stopped him with a raised index finger. "I know your work," she said. She knelt again, her eyes dead-straight with his. "My Antaam are in Tevinter as officially as you are. Does that change your tone?"

Genitivi blanched.

"Brother Ferdinand Genitivi," he said carefully. "Emeritus scholar of the University of Val Royeaux, servant of His Glory."

"Oh," cooed Rasaan, "still the titles." She took his hand, intertwining their fingers, hers dwarfing his. "If I took your profession, took you from your titles, what would be your name?"

Genitivi looked confused and shook his head. "Brother Ferdinand Genitivi, a servant of His Glory."

Rasaan tightened her grip, bending his fingers back painfully.

"What would be your name?"

"I am a servant of His Glory!"

There was a small crack.

"I have a name you've never heard!" interrupted formerly Sister Laudine.

Rasaan tilted her head, interested, and loosed her grip. Genitivi cradled his hand. Philliam looked at Laudine, alarmed, silently mouthing *What are you doing?*

"Very well," said Rasaan, stepping in front of the smaller woman. She kneeled again. "I assume you are as these two. A scribe with a title."

Laudine nodded. "You've never heard my true name. I've never said it to anyone." She lowered her voice as she spoke, and Rasaan instinctively leaned forward.

"Go on, then," she said, bemused. They were almost embracing.

Laudine whispered low in Rasaan's ear. Philliam saw the reaction, and it mirrored his.

"Saarebas-alit an," said Laudine.

She didn't know much of the language—Qunlat was coarser than ancient Elven—but she'd said enough. *Saarebas* literally meant "dangerous thing," the Qunari word for mage. *Basalit an* was a foe worthy of respect.

Rasaan's gray skin went white. She hadn't bound the captives as mages.

Laudine clenched a first, and rift-green energy erupted beneath her. Stone was rent from the floor as Rasaan leapt back, but the guard behind Laudine wasn't as quick. A pillar of rock smashed him into the ceiling, crushing his chest.

Mateo turned, grabbing the spear still in the hands of his shocked guard. He didn't make the mistake of trying to pull the weapon free. Instead, he forced the tip down while pushing the spear back, driving the blunt end up into the Qunari's neck. Vitaar or no, his windpipe collapsed. A second later the spear was embedded in Philliam's guard, and he and Mateo tackled the one behind Genitivi. Genitivi himself crawled behind the pile of tomes on the slab, kicking weapons away in case reinforcements arrived.

Rasaan scrabbled backward. She ignored "the Elder" and "the Mouth," moving steadily away from "the Warrior" and "the Mage." Too many of her kith were still down the tunnels. If they ran back now, they'd be in a line, unable to gain advantage as Mateo blocked them and Laudine threw the earth in their faces.

Rasaan reached for the lever that controlled the mineshaft elevator.

Laudine stood lightly, hands upturned. Small fractures glowed in the air above her palms, stones orbiting both. Sweat beaded on her temple. She looked at Rasaan.

"I told you the truth," she said plainly.

"I will see you soon," said Rasaan.

She threw the lever, releasing ancient counterweights. The stone slab jolted upward, and as they tossed their last guard aside, Philliam,

Laudine, Genitivi, and Mateo rose into the night.

At the top of the shaft, Philliam grabbed the most promising of the elven tomes, and the four of them started in the direction of the Imperial Highway and their coach. Behind them, the stone slab began another descent. There was no obvious way to destroy the mechanism. It had survived centuries more than they could inflict on it. Unless. . . .

Philliam looked hopefully at Laudine.

She shook her head. Her eyes were sunken, her usual elegance strained.

"I hid this, I'm not trained," she said. "My ears and . . . eyes are ringing, I need a moment."

"You will have it," said Genitivi, "but not much more."

With a *whoosh* and a *thunk*, the stone slab reached the bottom of the shaft. When it came back up, it would be carrying Rasaan and her kith. The ascent would take longer than the drop, as theirs had, but it was still only a matter of minutes.

They ran.

A single Qunari was guarding their coach. Mateo gabbed him by the horns and broke his neck, nearly wrenching his head from his shoulders. Philliam could see wagons around a campfire about a mile away, but they didn't have time to disrupt the few minders. They gathered the four horses they'd left grazing, and Mateo hitched them as fast as he could.

As he finished, a horn in the distance signaled that Rasaan was now in pursuit, and their expedition would soon come to its inevitable, violent end.

***

"Are we sure about this? I'm having second thoughts."

"This *is* getting a bit speculative. 'Crafting history' is antithetical to what I—"

"Can you write?"

"You know that my hand—"

"Can *you* write?"

"My vision's still—"

"Then both of you shut it. This part is mine."

***

Mateo was driving the coach hard, pushing the horses well beyond their usual tradesman's gait. Laudine was on the bench seat behind him, trying to get air. Genitivi was huddled in the coach box, cradling his hand, quoting details. Philliam was next to him, scribbling. They'd wrapped the few tomes they'd grabbed in burlap and were recording every detail of the journey, the descent, their discovery, and the enemy.

"It makes no sense," said Genitivi, "that is not how Qunari behave."

"You have experience?" said Philliam.

"You would be surprised." Genitivi managed a chuckle despite the circumstances.

"She called them Antaam," said Philliam.

"*Her* Antaam. Names are important to that one," said Laudine. "Write it."

Philliam did as he was told, ending the static details with dramatic flair. The stakes had to be known. *The Fen Harel question. How many lives. . . .*

And as he didn't quite finish, Rasaan's wagon entered longbow range. Mateo had kept their lead as long as he could, but his team was tiring, and Antaam horses were bred for endurance and war. Sparks lit up the road around them as arrows landed wild.

Mateo hunched, wrestling with the reins. Laudine lay as flat as she could on the bench. Genitivi and Philliam had nowhere to go.

One of their four driving horses—the closest on the left—whinnied in pain as an arrow suddenly arced down into its shoulder, rendering its left foreleg instantly immobile. Its head dipped below the pole that tethered it to its running partners, pulling the team off their track.

Mateo wrapped the reins around his forearm and heaved backward, hauling the animal up for a fleeting moment. He grabbed his blade, swinging the heavy dao with one hand, cutting straps to bridle and saddle in one clean motion, the last time "clean" would be appropriate. He released the reins and the horse fell back down over the incapacitated leg. It immediately collapsed left, snapping its neck on the stones of the Imperial Highway.

The coach righted, and the remaining team of three continued pulling. They didn't lose much speed, but that wasn't the only arrow to find a target.

Philliam wrote as long as he could. It was the only thing he'd ever been good at. Finally, on this stupid quest, there was a slim chance that

this useless skill that couldn't build a house, grow a crop, or appease a father could, in this one specific circumstance, help save the world.

Philliam looked up to see an arrow in Genitivi's chest.

No, he thought, that wasn't fair. The old man had done so much more than him, he deserved better than an arrow in the lung, dripping blood from the fletching.

From the fletching?

"Oh, child," said Genitivi.

If Philliam had looked down, he'd have seen a stain growing on his armor. If he could've seen behind himself, he'd have had witty concerns about the matching hole in his back. Antaam bows were very strong.

He didn't see either of these things. He slumped sideways as Laudine screamed. The air above them rippled in response.

Far behind, Rasaan lowered her bow and squinted through the dust. The heavy Antaam wagons had been steadily gaining for an hour, and with her prey down to three horses, they would quickly close the remaining distance.

Rasaan signaled for another volley.

A boulder from nowhere arced toward them. It bounced once, throwing shrapnel, before reducing the soldier on Rasaan's left into a stain.

Laudine screamed again. Another stone appeared from nothing and was hurled into the darkness. It flew wide, but showered the highway with more debris. The Antaam wagon slowed, losing ground, weaving to avoid further volleys.

Rasaan calmly wiped a mist of blood from her horns.

"The mage's hands are mine," she said.

Mateo used the brief reprieve to cut a second horse free. Despite the noise around him, he'd noticed its rhythm was off. A sign it was lame, or soon would be. Rather than risk another stumble, he backed the lead animals off for a second, cut straps, and slapped the horse's haunch so it stepped right. Once clear it immediately slowed, clattering to stop at the side of the highway, lifting a rear leg.

Mateo kept the coach straight and fast, but they weren't winning this race.

Laudine was sweating, breathing hard, and shoving paper against the wound in Philliam's chest. Genitivi added what weight he could as his own strength waned.

Philliam smiled. In his head, he'd pulled the arrow from the old man, hurling it over his shoulder, back at the archer. He imagined the story it would be in the guilds, the irony of how his heroics would allow Genitivi to continue unabridged. As shouts from Laudine became a hollow wind, he saw his contribution to academics finally recognized. As his pupils grew dark, and were overwhelmed by the stars above, he saw the pull quote on the epic he would write: *A triumphant validation of Philliam, a Bard! Through him, our world has new focus.*

"New focus . . ." He trailed off.

Genitivi slumped across Philliam. He seemed elsewhere, muttering the long details of his work studying Tevinter architecture. The wonder of the Imperial Highway, the stones that marked distance, and the pillars below.

"The pillars below . . ."

Rasaan drove on. Arrows rained down.

Laudine reeled. Each use of magic had been desperate, erratic, taxing her body. She covered her ears, but her blurred senses, the quirk of her unique perspective, wouldn't let her escape. She saw the last words of her peers, felt their stillness, heard her own fear.

And then, as often happened, there was insight.

"Focus through the pillars below," she said.

Laudine stood. She looked ahead, past Mateo. The Imperial Highway stretched on like a Genitivi treatise, markers on the short sidewalls every hundred yards, the tip of each supporting a pillar below. She looked back, past the lame horse coming to a stop, to the white-haired hatred that followed them.

And she focused.

Formerly Sister Laudine reached into the Fade not above but below, and pulled stone into existence inside the road, where it already was. This was not possible, and the red that trailed from her ear showed the effort. She paid it no mind. She was fueled by other blood—Genitivi's on the arrow, and Philliam's on her hands.

"Rasaan of the Antaam, you will feel this," she said with unflinching honesty.

Stone merged with stone and the Imperial Highway exploded beneath their small coach. If they were stationary, they would have immediately fallen to the Silent Plains below, to the ash and sand of a thousand deaths in that spot alone. Instead, Laudine's rage sent them

upward six feet, and their forward momentum carried them out of the hole she had willed.

The two remaining horses tried to find their feet. The right landed steady, pulling. The left fell over its own legs, falling under the pole that bound them together, shattering it. The doomed animal whinnied painfully, and the coach dipped, though still partially airborne.

Mateo leapt forward, cutting straps again and then wrestling the reins right. They plowed forward, rubble moving with them, pushing the bulk of the fallen horse. The front axle cracked sickly at the strain. They wouldn't be able to keep their previous speed, even if that was possible with only one horse leading a coach built for four.

They wouldn't need to.

Laudine fell to the bench, staring back at the results of her work. She'd rent the highway just before one of the massive stone pillars. And though they were limping, the road ahead remained solid, the section supported at both ends. But behind them, the rumble continued. Massive slabs of stone fell, widening the hole, swallowing the forward wave of their pursuers.

Rasaan was again faster than her soldiers. She barked the order to stop, then leapt backward when it wasn't going to happen. Her wagon launched into darkness, and she skidded after it, leaving a red stain of hardened skin on the road behind her. She caught herself on the edge, a jagged, violent stop that left her half hanging amid fractured stonework. Below her, the crushed remains of her kith, their blood flowing into the ash of ages.

She hauled herself up, and watched the coach and her prey fade into the distance. She stood silent, staring, growing cold in the failure of the moment.

Then she turned with resolve, and her Antaam turned with her.

Mateo counted sixty pillars, then brought the coach to a gentle stop. He stepped down to the cold stones and walked to the side of the box. Philliam and Genitivi stared at him, caught in a hopeful pause.

He reached across and closed their eyes.

Laudine was leaning back in the box, watching impassively. He placed a hand on her searing forehead and saw the blood from ear to collar.

She looked . . . well, she looked like nothing. The effort she had expended had come at a cost. The untrained part of her that had reached

across the Veil, done the impossible, was gone. A tear rolled from one eye, but as it reached her lip there was no quiver, no indication of what had inspired it. She seemed calm. Relaxed. Tranquil.

Mateo shook his head. He placed a blanket around Laudine's shoulders and took the bundle of books and pages from among his three charges. He secured it carefully on the bench and walked to the front of the cart.

The remaining horse snorted at his approach, shaking its head.

Mateo smiled softly and removed the broken poles and straps that had previously joined four bridles. He tossed them off the side of the Imperial Highway, noting the short time it took to whuff into the strangely purple sands below.

He looked back at the satchel of books set at the corner of the coach.

A week later he'd deliver the package to Lord Varondale, then find his way back to Rivain.

A month later it would be delivered to another writer—Tethras, or something—and plans would be made.

A year later, nations would stand, and tremble.

Mateo rehitched the remaining horse, centering it so the weight of the coach was balanced. He looked into its dark eyes, patted its head, and climbed back into his seat.

Blood mingled between the rails of the coach box. A final collaboration. Formerly Sister Laudine hummed an Orlesian lullaby to the space where Phlliam and Genitivi had been. Tuneless, as though perfectly remembered, but with no feeling in the melody.

And the coach drove on, wheels beating rhythm out of the highway stones, long into the night.

***

"That is how you *end* it?"

Philliam, a Bard!, Brother Genitivi, and formerly Sister Laudine sat at a corner table in the Hilt, a roaming public house that was—according to this month's dice roll—on the coast of Rivain. Around them, Mateo's Lords of Fortune comrades slapped backs and tipped back. Pages were laid out between them. Some ancient, some new and under scrutiny.

Genitivi leaned in his chair, tapping the side of his ale with a judgmental ring finger. Philliam felt the scholar's critiques like Antaam

arrows.

"It is quite dour."

"It's cautionary," said Philliam, waving the quill in his hand. "More punch than 'Mateo shoved a stick in the lift works.'"

"I think it's rather touching," said Laudine, idling a finger around the lip of her glass. She exchanged glances with a female Qunari-Rivaini seer at the bar. "Cathartic," she added.

"A long road about a long road," grumbled Genitivi. "You certainly took some liberties."

"It's about tone," said Philliam. "We can't say what we found, that's for the generals. This is for the people." He looked down at his pages. As always, editorial comment made him doubt himself.

"I don't think you quite captured the Silent Plains," said Laudine, still distracted.

"More evocative." Philliam nodded, taking the easier note. "I'll stress they were 'strangely' purple."

"Like your writing," said Genitivi, hiding a smirk with his drink.

Philliam looked up, hurt, then smiled as Laudine failed to stifle a snort-laugh that was entirely off-brand.

Genitivi paused, thoughtful.

"Are we all dead, then?" he asked.

"Not in this draft," said Laudine. "At least, I'm not. And Mateo."

"Ah, but you can't be hurt anymore," said Philliam. He placed his hand to his forehead in mock anguish. "And our brave delver will forever regret that he couldn't save us."

A chorus of cheers erupted from the bar as Mateo drained a pitcher of cider while standing on his hands.

"See," said Philliam, shaking his head sadly, "a broken man."

Genitivi tapped one of the ancient pages on the table.

"But we continue," he said. "Write our warnings as someone else?"

"For a time." Philliam shrugged.

"That Rasaan *will* chase us," said Laudine. "And her strange Antaam. I'd rather change my name than have her take it."

"Easy for you to say, I have decades more with mine."

"We can have other names," said Philliam. "Becoming other people is kind of the job."

"But it was such a *good* name," said Genitivi, gesturing with flair. "Fer-di-NAND gen-i-TEEE-vi."

Philliam rolled his eyes over to Laudine. “Told you we should’ve brought the Dowager.”

“Well,” said Genitivi, “perhaps her rates can be discussed.” He winked. Philliam’s quill and jaw both dropped.

“As you said, child, we can have other names.”

Another history revised. Their third or fourth of the night.

“Well,” said Laudine, recovering slightly faster than Philliam, “five scarves fluttered in shock out of five.”

Philliam raised a glass.

“You really are the best, old man.”

Genitivi stood with his peers.

“Don’t you forget it.”

They clinked their glasses, returned to their edits, and argued into the night, in search of the perfect ending. Around them, the bar served on, the coast lapped at historic sands. And in distant places blades were sharpened, and wolves walked in dreams.

And *then* . . .

***

“And then? And then what? We were done, child. Restrain yourself.”

“If we’re inventing, let’s invent. Serials are where the money—ow!”

“I warned you both.”

“Fine. Point taken.”

“Quite literally.”

HEROLD HAD THE PLAN

RYAN CORMIER

Bharv never quite learned the trick to running, despite his years of practice. Every branch along the riverbank slashed his sweaty face; his boots hooked under each tree root. He stumbled along on stocky legs, certain he'd hear the hounds call and arrows whistle at any moment. He was panting, each step forward a struggle. Bharv looked over his shoulder—as though that ever went well—and grinned at the empty trail. He even snickered. Then he put a boot wrong and tumbled ass over beard, sliding into the reedy muck of the Minanter River. He stopped. Held his breath. Swamp water streamed down his face. Bharv's heart tried to leave his chest. Nothing. No Starkhaven guards. None of the tournament knights either. Given his wounds, those bastards really hated thieves. Or perhaps they simply didn't like Lords of Fortune. Could go either way, in his experience.

The dwarf clawed back up to the dry riverbank and looked around. Not bad. He'd slammed his face into the ground roughly where he wanted to be, with a hidden view of the rendezvous point. He winced, flopped down, and pulled up his shirt. The cut across his belly wasn't deep, but it stung like the blade was still digging around in there. With the job crashed, Bharv didn't know who got killed, who was grabbed, or who might squeal. If the rendezvous point filled with knights screaming about brigands, he'd know a little more. Something poked against his

side and he discovered an arrow lodged in his coat, stuck through a wide pocket. He'd spent so much luck escaping Starkhaven he'd never be dealt a solid hand of cards again.

Bharv took an apple from his pocket and swatted away black flies with his free hand. He'd suffered worse injuries. This didn't compare to the time he fell off an Antivan temple and landed on a rock while snatching that golden headpiece. Bharv skipped that part of the story while standing on barroom tables across Rivain. He'd put a dent the size of his fist in that priceless headpiece. The Lords of Fortune provided all the thrills he craved, but decades in their service left him with long scars and a crooked back. Still, despite the pain, he'd always slept better as a Lord of Fortune than as a creeping thief in his younger years. Through decades of treasure hunting, he'd collected his cut and felt no remorse on days he retrieved artifacts from rich bidders who saw times of war as opportunities to add to their collections. He could live with a sore back when it came with a clearer conscience.

Bharv heard light, elven footsteps behind him, but didn't turn around. He already knew who was there.

"Well, that was a complete disaster," Elim said. She'd fled the same distance he had, but her breaths were steady. She wasn't even sweating.

He spoke with his mouth full. "I've seen jobs go better."

Bharv wasn't sure if his fellow Lord of Fortune spoke in her true accent or not. He doubted it. Word was she had a dozen or more. He looked up at her expectantly. Elim nodded and allowed him a look at the red amulet hidden beneath her wig as she tossed the false hair into the brush. Beneath, her black locks were held low and tight with a long pin. Bharv offered her a second apple from his pocket. She accepted with a questioning look.

"My daughters think it's important I eat right while running for my life," Bharv said. "All four of them agree on it. They agree a lot."

Elim wiped the apple on her sleeve like she was trying to rub the red off. She examined it, frowned, then put it in her pocket. "No offense. You are just filthy, is all."

He nodded. "Had to wade though Starkhaven's waste pipes to escape. You know, after you dashed ahead and left me."

"I was trying to flee with haste. You run like a newborn deer."

Bharv couldn't argue with that. He took another bite of his apple. Made no sense. They'd recovered the amulet from the lockbox at the

Grand Tourney like sneaking the sugarcake from a child's lunch. No one spotted them. No one at the tournament even sneered in their direction. Thankfully, the security dullards were predictable enough to keep to their usual patrol schedule. Spectators were too busy being rich; the knights too busy polishing themselves for competition. Bharv and the others snuck away from the tournament during the quarter-final jousting runs and could've tooted a horn and waved a flag as they left. Then they were barely across the street before the whole thing turned to shit. Screaming Starkhaven guards. Arrows. Angry tournament knights riding their ridiculous horses. The whole show. Entire city jumped on their necks and Bharv couldn't think of a good reason why. For that much ruckus, someone must've run to the lockbox after they left, busted it back open, discovered the red glass they'd left behind, and immediately known it was fake. Bharv snorted. No way.

Elim muttered irately as she paced behind the bushes between them and the rendezvous point. The sun flashed across her face between the branches. "What happened back there?"

"I'm sitting here asking myself the same thing."

"That's hardly encouraging. No wonder you requested my help. You can't plan your way into a pair of pants. This is why people think we Lords of Fortune can't piss on the ground without somehow raising the dead."

Bharv couldn't argue with that either. Elim was a renowned specialist among the Lords and did her job well. The team couldn't have snuck into the tournament without her. Even if they could have, they would've had to bust apart the lockbox with a rock. Elim opened it with her earring in the blink of an eye.

"No answers, then?" she asked. "You're little better at this than your friend Herold, are you?"

Bharv looked up sharply. His scowl chased the scorn from Elim's face and she sat next to him. Bharv finished his apple and spit the seeds out. Elim rubbed a false tattoo off the back of her hand, smudging the ink away with her thumb. Once it was gone, she rubbed her hand a minute longer.

"I'm sorry. How did it happen?"

"Arrow," Bharv said. "Quick."

"Were you two together long?"

"Few years. Lately, I helped Herold chase Tevinter relics that were uncovered and sent rolling in the wake of this Antaam chaos in the north. Plenty to chase. Damn horns kicked up all sorts of ancient, dangerous things up there. Some were just waiting in rich men's vaults, begging us to recover them. Other artifacts were stolen from ruins and have been traded or sold since. You're holding one of those. Chased this prize through three owners in two weeks. Came out of a maze of catacombs the horns discovered. Herold and I had such times in those old places. There was always some ancient curse or resurrected beast to greet us. Like boys, we were. What fun. Herold gleefully led the way, and I watched his back. I did a decent job of it, too. Until today."

Elim gave him another moment. "We need to run, Bharv. A tournament's worth of knights are too proud to let us escape. They will bring dogs."

"What about our hired help?"

"The less said of him, the better." Elim rolled her eyes, then stopped when she spotted Bharv's red-stained shirt.

"It's small," he said. "Had worse."

Bharv figured their best choice was to flee west along the Minanter, away from Starkhaven. With luck, they could reach Tantervale, lay low, then sneak out of the Free Marches once the heat eased down. North or south was into wilderness they weren't prepared for. It was best to stick close to the farms and fishing shacks near the river. They couldn't trust the stabled horses Bharv arranged for the day before. Until everyone was accounted for, they had to improvise.

Elim set a quick pace. She kept them just inside the trees that followed the riverbank. Branches that clipped her shoulders slapped his face, pushing leaves into his beard. For all her fancy, the elf moved over rough ground like it was a dance floor. Bharv's daughters kept telling him he should run more. Not for any reason, not from any monster, just to end up in the same place he'd started. Good for his heart, they said. What kind of sisters agreed on everything? He and his own siblings fought like badgers.

Ahead, Elim grabbed mintroot leaves from a tree and rubbed them over her arms and neck until they were a shredded, pungent mess that crumbled from her hands. Moments later, he couldn't smell her perfume anymore. She stopped to pick up a handful of dirt and pine needles and rubbed them on her red jacket until it was shades darker. The elf tore

away her dress at the waist and revealed a pair of tights beneath. Smart, Bharv thought. Fancy enough for the Grand Tourney, but adaptable for a quick exit. Finished, she slowed her steps for Bharv to catch up. When he did, she took out the amulet. It was blackish red, darker than Elim's dirtied clothes. Bharv considered that a bad sign. In his experience, red amulets brought trouble.

"What precisely does this artifact do?" Elim asked.

Bharv shrugged. He was told it was ancient and powerful. That was all he needed to know.

"You carry it." Elim thrust it at him. "I don't want a lightning bolt up my arse."

Bharv didn't either, but reached for it anyway. His hand was nicked and scratched from his desperate leap through that window in Starkhaven. If the amulet shot lightning, he figured it would've gone off by now.

Elim grabbed Bharv's shoulder and pulled them both to a crouch. There was thrashing near the river up ahead, farther up the bank. Something stomped through the green and didn't care who heard. A faint, deep voice floated through the trees.

Elim sighed. "Panzstott. Apparently, he's talking to himself."

"Sounds like a bear. He must know we're being hunted."

"He makes even you look sharp. Leave him to get picked up by the guards. Nothing he could tell them worries me. You didn't tell him too much of your background, right?"

Bharv shook his head. "Might know something about what happened at the Grand Tourney, though. Why it stunk. When's the last time you saw him?"

"He was running in the same direction as us, just on a different path. I saw him charge past a memorial of some sort. There were flowers all over it and a flame in the middle. Idiot nearly knocked the whole thing over."

Bharv remembered the memorial. He'd stopped there on the way in. "Flowers were for Jacques Gallais, the Chevalier who won the last pompous tournament."

"I heard he was dead," Elim said.

"I heard he was murdered."

More thrashing and cursing carried along the riverbank. Panzstott would draw attention soon, from their pursuers or something worse

lurking in the river. There were stories.

"Where did you find him?" Elim asked.

"Came recommended in Tantervale. Looks the part well enough."

Elim withered him with a glare. "You hired him for his muscles, requested me for everything else. What precisely do we rely on you for?"

Bharv studied his boots. "My specialty is escapes. Exit strategies."

She gawked at him. "You couldn't find your way from a horse's head to its arse."

"Yeah. Today isn't really a career highlight."

Their heads snapped around as barking echoed behind them. The hounds had their scent. It was back to Starkhaven, then, chained in a cell while another artifact was lost to stuffy fools and their boring collections.

"The river will hide our scent," he said.

She eyed the water. "There are good reasons to stay out of the Minanter."

"I got better ones to go in."

Bharv knew it was a bad idea. First rule of escapes—never go in until you knew every way back out. The Minanter roiled around their boots as the two Lords of Fortune waded into its current. The riverbed was rough with rocks and thick with plant stalks and vines. The spring rush was too muddy to see more than a foot down. The water rose to their knees and overwhelmed any sound from Panzstott ahead or the dogs behind. Bharv grit his teeth against the icy river. He'd taken colder baths. Still, they couldn't stay in the water long. It was too disastrous a day to get frost in their joints. Elim gasped as the water reached her waist, then stopped dead. Her long jacket floated in a red circle around her.

"Something moved," she said.

Bharv looked back at the riverbank as they pushed through the rushing water, where he expected a Starkhaven scout to stare back at him.

"Bharv," Elim hissed. "We have bigger problems."

"Just branches." Bharv searched the bank for Panzstott. "Nothing to worry about."

Frigid, brown river water erupted into Bharv's face as something black and slimy exploded from the water. He threw his arms up as wide, leathery flaps hugged him and slapped against his back like his oldest friend. Something hissed and hot flecks spattered his face. The thing was

muscular, squeezing him. His elbows clacked together. His knees ground into each other as his kicking feet left the water.

"You're wrong again!" Elim yelled.

A wide, round mouth opened in the underside of the creature, like a tin of rotted meat lined with teeth. Raytooth, Bharv thought. Too bad he already spent all his luck back in Starkhaven. The great ray yanked Bharv upward with its thick, segmented tail planted in the riverbed. Bharv swung sideways, then upside down. The ray screamed into Bharv's face as it dragged him across the river's surface, his body rolling and plunging as he tried to breathe. His hair plastered against his face, over his mouth. The ray spat in his eyes. Fangs like needles.

Bharv closed his eyes. *Francesca. Melindarah. Sandrine. Bellaclare. They'd have to survive the coming times without him.*

The flaps suddenly loosened, and he slipped through the stink until the creature only held him by one leg. He gasped for fresh air. Through the river's churn, he glimpsed Panzstott swinging a greatsword into the ray's tail, sending forth another bloody spray. The big man's armored sash flashed in the sun. Hissing, the ray chomped at Bharv, but the movement freed his leg and he fell into the water, the beast's whipcord body lashing against him. Fangs clicked against Bharv's boots as he scrambled through the muck, desperate for the bank. Something latched onto his arm and he recoiled.

Elim wiped her sleeve across his eyes. "A minnow and nothing more."

Bharv wrenched around and saw the raytooth's severed flaps sink beneath the water around Panzstott. Loops of the creature's tail went limp and floated away. Bharv breathed again. He pulled ropes of thick ray slime from his beard. All four of his daughters said he should quit this life before it killed him. They agreed a lot.

"I don't like fish." Panzstott sheathed his weapon. It disappeared behind his thick neck. He pulled up the hood on a cloak that looked like a child's blanket tossed over his wide shoulders. Angry barks sounded behind them again. Too close. "I don't like dogs."

They abandoned all secrecy and ran, splashing through the shallows as clear targets for a skilled archer. Bharv did his best, but fell several strides behind. He yelled at Panzstott, "What's ahead?"

"Waterfall."

Of course. There was always a waterfall. The bridge always collapsed. The unlocked tomb always had spike-hammer traps. What fun could

possibly be had if they did not? How could one feel young if they'd never dangled from their fingertips over a roiling mass of darkspawn? Herold had been full of good questions like that.

"How big a fall?" Bharv asked.

"Not far, but far."

Didn't have to be a long drop, he told himself. Just enough that the horses couldn't follow, that the hounds wouldn't jump. Not long enough to kill him, preferably. Ahead, the Minanter churned against a ridge before spilling over the other side. Little tremors shook the ground as horses entered the river in pursuit. Bharv stumbled on wet rocks. Voices yelled behind him.

At the last moment, Panzstott turned with a child's fear plain on his face. He shook his head. Beside him, Elim looked alarmed. "It is not—"

A Starkhaven arrow hummed past Bharv and flew between the elf's head and Panzstott's chest. Bharv leaped forward and slammed into Panzstott like hitting a wall, then spun into Elim, cutting off her warning as the three toppled over the edge. Cold air rushed across Bharv's cheeks and he slapped against the water sooner than he expected, sooner than he could pull breath. The world faded in a blurred, muted crush of water, rocks, and weeds. As the river swirled, he grabbed at the pocket with the amulet, planted a boot, and pushed until his head broke the surface. He gasped. "That wasn't so—

"Hold on!" Elim yelled, and then somehow they were over the edge again. Impossibly, the sky swung beneath him a second time, and the air rushed by once more. A longer drop than the first. Bharv had time to think about his daughters' good advice he didn't take. Then the water again. Flat on his back this time. His breath rushed out of him. Bharv sunk deep, his heavy boots pumping for riverbed that wasn't there. He clawed to the surface and took half the world's air in his first gasp.

"Are we done falling?" Panzstott gasped.

"I think so." Elim hacked up river water.

Bharv rolled onto the bank like a sack of drowned rats. He wiped the mud from his smile. Above him, Elim wrestled with her mouth before she laughed, which squeaked like pulling a cork from a bottle.

"Told you," he said. "Master of escapes."

Panzstott shook his head and turned away. "Lords of Fortune are crazy."

"Still have it?" she asked.

Bharv patted his pocket.

***

They could breathe while they walked, at least for a bit. The Minanter bath would cover their scent while the guards and knights searched for a way down. But once the hounds gained enough ground, even the river wouldn't help. Starkhaven could afford good hounds. Bharv flexed his arms inside his stiff, dirty jacket. His boots squished with every step. Birds in high branches chirped loudly as they passed, determined to give them away.

Elim didn't wait with her questions. "What happened at the tourney, Panzstott? What did you see?"

The big man's eyes went wide. He had eyebrows like wild, forgotten hedges. "Everyone got mad so fast. You said to watch the tent from the corral. And I did. Then everyone got mad. I saw you running. I ran in the same direction."

Elim waited a moment. "That's all? The entire story? That isn't helpful."

Panzstott looked crestfallen. "That's all that happened. I ran."

Bharv kept his mouth shut, but he knew. Panzstott was about as good a liar as Bharv's youngest daughter.

Elim changed tactics. "What do you have planned with your share of the money?"

He beamed. "I'm gonna find my sister. Lady I know is gonna help."

"Your sister?"

"Lady will help me. She'll find my sister after I give her all my money in Tantervale."

"Right." Elim threw Bharv a glance. Panzstott hadn't mentioned a lady, sister, or any woman when Bharv hired him in that toilet of a bar in Tantervale. The man took up two tables by himself and that was the only qualification necessary. Don't push it, Elim, Bharv thought. Let him get there. To her credit, the elf shifted strategies again.

"Where are we headed? Surely we are running somewhere."

Bharv shrugged and stopped walking. Time to say it, he supposed. "Only Herold knew that. We're selling to someone he trusts. He never said who."

Elim drew a knife Bharv didn't know she had, muttered to herself, then sheathed it again. "Stupidest words I ever heard, and I rarely hear any other kind."

Bharv frowned. "What do you want? Blueprints of the plan? Never made them. Herold and I usually just lit something on fire and tossed it on the pile. I don't know the buyer's name so the guards can't squeeze it out of me. Two people know, that's twice the chance to ruin the job. You know, I should be the one giving you the strange look. My way is the Lords of Fortune way and—

"Your way is falling down a lot."

"Don't fight," Panzstott said softly.

"—it's done fine so far. Every great story in Rivain ever told. Done us well against the damn Antaam and the Venatori. Best treasure hunters in all the world and all the caves beneath it. We only needed you—"

"When your way wouldn't work."

"Why'd you come down here with us worms, anyway?" Bharv asked. "Slumming?"

"I'm exceptional at what I do. You shouldn't need any other reason."

Panzstott stepped between them. "Herold said we would give the amulet to a squire. I heard him talking."

Elim snorted and looked horrified she'd done so. "No squire can afford that amulet. Not if I am negotiating."

Bharv furrowed his entire face. Something Herold once drunkenly said about a squire . . .

Elim gestured to a high point on the riverbank. "Panzstott, go see what lies ahead. You're tallest."

Bharv and Elim waited until he was out of earshot and both opened their mouths to talk. She beat him to it. "Stop your childishness. We have larger, dumber problems. What lady is Panzstott talking about?"

Bharv gestured in futility. "I don't ask hired thugs about the women in their lives. We needed someone who picks his teeth with table legs and Panzstott wanted coin. The perfect partnership. We shook on it, then we drank. Could be sticky, but who cares what he does with his cut? If he's being conned, it's not on our backs."

"Panzstott had a hammer when we snuck into the Grand Tourney. Now he carries a bright shining sword across his back. Where did he get it?"

"Might've picked it up fighting his way out of Starkhaven."

"Possibly. I need a closer look."

"Just don't piss him off until we can avoid him stepping on us."

"Perhaps you fear him." Elim pushed stray hairs behind her pointed ear. "I'm full of surprises. Come. We must move, even without a direction."

Each step he took with no sign of their trackers made Bharv feel lighter. If he closed his eyes, this could be a walk with his daughters in the wilds near their Rivain home. He could hear them racing through scattered leaves, bouncing off each other, and laughing loud enough to be heard in Ferelden. Clumsy as drunks, they all were, even still. Looks from their mother, and feet from their father. Wasn't the same without the smell of salt, though. Bharv's farm was on the Rivain coast and his daughters were never more than a day's walk from the ocean. He'd never seen them without salt in his nose. Without it, the memory was never enough.

He swallowed down the worry that thoughts of his daughters often brought up his throat. The violent business between the qunari and Tevinter was still well away from his farm, but only fools believed in the strength of borders scrawled on a map. Safety could be snatched away even by slight winds. Chasing relics across Tevinter, he and Herold had witnessed firsthand the children and families wounded by the northern battles. They'd passed several makeshift hospitals with thin walls that bulged with fresh patients. Real wartime shit. It was difficult to walk away from. For two days after, Bharv nearly had to drag Herold south. He kept looking back and Bharv didn't need to ask what misery was on his mind.

Up ahead, the sun through the trees lit the afternoon sky in purple and orange. Bharv stared at it until his eyes hurt. Once retired, he would miss many things about the Lord of Fortune life, but sunsets from all over the world topped the list.

Elim fell in beside Panzstott. "Want to hear something fun?"

He nodded like he'd been bored fleeing for his life.

"My name is Dora Brown. Born and raised Ferelden-strong."

Panzstott threw his massive arms in the air with delight as her accent changed. He leaned closer to her as though it would help him understand how she did it. It even caught Bharv by surprise, and he knew about Elim's skills. Her voice dropped from refined to "cheery woodland" in a breath's span, just as appealing but for different reasons.

The Ferelden accent was spot-on. As a younger man, he'd chatted up enough barmaids to recognize it instantly.

"It's your misfortune to meet Claudia Pirro, of the House of Crows."

Panzstott clapped, and Bharv chuckled. It was uncanny.

"Margeaux DeLamore, monsieur. You've caught me on my way to the Orlesian court."

Panzstott pointed excitedly at Elim. Looked like he might wet himself. "That's a good one. Sounds like the lady who will find my sister."

Elim glanced back at Bharv. He knew the same question had popped into her head. Why would an Orlesian woman offer to find a Tantervale brute's sister? Long way to travel just to help a stranger. So generous, yet she was charging Panzstott all the money he had to find missing family. Bharv's daughters—particularly young Sandrine—lectured him that kindness needed no reward until he wanted to slice his ears off. He'd never believed that. Stealing and adventuring did that to a man. Ground down whatever optimism he'd passed to his daughters until he no longer understood those who worked at drudgery for their coin. Eroded his faith in people until he wondered what everyone was taking. Used to drive his daughters' mother crazy. Bless her.

"Tell me about your sister." Elim was back to her original accent.

Panzstott smiled. "My big sister. She used to push me around. In a good way, though. To show her feelings. We grew up in marshes. Saw our parents only when they caught us. She looked out for me. Killed snakes for me. She thought of things for me all the time."

"And you need to find her?"

He nodded. "She went away last year. She was supposed to write me."

"Where was she headed?"

"Anderfels. Gone to be a Grey Warden."

Elim put a shocked look on her face. "That is a long journey indeed. A dangerous one, too."

"She's a very big sister."

The elf switched to her Orlesian accent. "And your lady believes she can find her?"

He brightened at the change in accent. "Lady Lucie, yes. She's sure my sister might be found. Says so all the time."

"Might be found?"

"Will be." Panzstott put threat into those two words. Bharv figured Elim noticed, same as him. "Lady Lucie says she can find anyone. Her husband is also a warden."

Elim cocked her head. "Really?"

Shit, Bharv thought. Another potential new wrinkle. He patted the amulet in his pocket. The more unknowns on a job, the more he checked the goods. His hand felt different scraping across his rough jacket. No pain. He examined it in the failing light. The scratches he'd gotten from the window in Starkhaven were gone. He flicked his hand around at different angles to see if it was a shadow's trick. Smooth skin no matter which way he turned. Looked ten years younger than his other hand. He opened his mouth, shut it again, and tugged his sleeve down. He skimmed a couple of fingers under his shirt. The wound on his belly was still open, but the pain had dulled from searing to a low throb. So, the damn amulet healed people. Nice trick.

Guilt tickled at Bharv as he flexed his healed hand in his pocket. He would've told Herold about it immediately. Maybe the amulet could've grown back the toe on Herold's left foot. Claimed he lost it fighting a sea beast during his naval service, but that wasn't true. Herold could barely hold his lunch down in the bath, yet swore he swung an ax while clinging to a burning mast amongst roaring waves and the beast's mighty jaws. Bharv once watched an hour-long reenactment in a Rivain bar, and Herold was so drunk he called the story's hero "the Admiral" because he forgot it was supposed to be him.

Herold would've hated being in this position. At job's end, he liked to tie off the stumps and move on. His preferred method was to be halfway through the celebration hangover by now. Herold's plan to move the amulet back north where it belonged would've been something simple. Someone to move it, a meeting place he'd been before, where he knew the doors and windows. His usual routine. Bharv didn't think Herold would risk dealing with anyone new. Bad news was, that still left a long list of possible friends. Herold lived his whole life like he was running for public office. He slapped backs like everyone he met was choking on a grape. Herold truly trusted only a scant few of his contacts, and Bharv kept a close eye on the rest. Still, the list of his Free Marcher friends had to be short. Most of their fellows, and enemies, were farther north.

Herold was in a foul mood his last days, ever since Bharv dragged him away from the rows of stretchers and wounded in the north. They'd

been chasing the amulet from bandit to slimy agent for too long. Once inside the Free Marches, Herold guessed they were headed to the Grand Tourney. Rich targets and stuffy collectors from all over Thedas would be there, and it was a bad place for their prize to land. Herold and Bharv didn't credit much brains to a wealthy crowd entertained by men pushing each other off horses with sticks, but their sheer numbers were the problem. *If our prize gets lodged in a place packed with heroes, braggarts, and guards*, Herold said, *we'll never pry it free again. Not without a bigger fight than we're prepared for.*

"Stop," Elim whispered. She crouched behind trees and they followed. Bharv and Panzstott swung their heads about, but she closed her eyes and relied on her ears. She pointed east, the way they'd come. Bharv peered through the branches. They should've left the riverbank, he thought. Herold would've said so. The deeper woods were more dangerous, but the river was the most obvious trail their pursuers could follow and hope they'd catch up. Maybe they should've tried to reach the village bar he and Herold drank in on their way to Starkhaven. At least Bharv knew that place.

"We only want the sword." It was a man's voice calling. "Though we will take your thieving lives all the same."

Elim cocked her head. "Ferelden accent. Must be a tournament knight. He says he wants a sword, Panzstott."

Another voice—from the north—demanded they show themselves. Sounded like they were shouting blind in all directions. Still, they'd found their way down the riverbank faster than Bharv expected. It was possible the shouters were distractions while quieter trackers crept closer. Tournament knights were no more clever than wood, but the Prince of Starkhaven enjoyed a solid reputation throughout the Free Marches. No fools would be counted among his pursuing guards. As they crouched, and the shouting continued, Bharv and Elim finally got a good look at the greatsword across Panzstott's back. There were intricate carvings and numerous names etched into the steel. The blade gleamed, aside from the dried ray blood. It was no guard's sword picked up in the fray at the tourney.

The shouting faded, though none of them stood. The elf turned with a vicious look in her eye. "Show us that damn sword."

Panzstott looked bashful. He pulled the greatsword from its makeshift sheath, the golden hilt shining even in the setting sun. The big

man held it up, but not out.

"Where did you get that?" Elim asked.

"The tournament. I just grabbed it."

"That's why the whole place came after us. Your clumsy theft."

"Could've been you."

The elf looked offended. "I assure you it was not."

Elim reached for the sword and Panzstott's face changed from doughy to sharp. He made a low, guttural sound and shuffled back. He no longer held the sword lightly.

"No."

"Let me see what I am chased through these filthy woods for."

"What Herold died for." Bharv used a tone he rarely did with men that big.

"Never." Even Panzstott's voice was different. "It's what Lady Lucie wants. It's not yours. You got your thing, I got mine. All square."

The elf scoffed. "Hardly square. We didn't get caught."

"I didn't know people would see." Panzstott put a second hand on the blade's handle.

"Give me the sword." Elim stepped forward and moved one hand to the back of her head.

Panzstott growled and charged with his shoulder, sending Elim hurtling into Bharv. They tumbled to the ground in a tangle. Bharv snatched his hand away before it was crushed by Panzstott's thick boots. He charged noisily ahead of them.

"Move your old leg," Elim snapped as she leapt to her feet. She was quick, but Bharv managed to lurch forward and grab her ankle. She swung to the ground, rolled, and glared at him. "That sword gets us out of this alive."

Bharv pointed upward where an arrow still quivered in the tree above her. A red Starkhaven tail, emblem of the Vael family.

Hoofbeats sounded back along the riverbank. The two Lords of Fortune broke and ran, winding and scrambling through the cover of trees and rocks. Bharv looked behind them and gawked at the pair of tournament knights that galloped after them. All four of Bharv's daughters thought he should quit hunting down shiny things. They all agreed. Moments like this, so did he. Bharv made it to the trees, zagging between them best he could, slamming off one rough trunk to the next. He heard one set of hoofbeats behind him. Bharv swore the animal's

snorts were close enough to part his hair. Desperate, Bharv lunged over the nearest rock, rolling and scraping himself clean as he went. The knight's horse reared and swerved in its attempt to follow. The animal's front hooves kicked into the air and it fell over, the rider disappearing between his horse's flank and the rock with a thin wail. The Lord of Fortune watched as the horse scrambled to its feet, riderless, and charged away to the river, still draped in its bright tournament finery.

Ahead, the second mounted knight tried to run Panzstott down. He turned more sharply than a man that big should've been able to, and slashed his stolen sword at the oncoming horse's neck. The animal screamed, then fell under a red fan of blood. Bharv heard the knight's leg break beneath the animal's weight as they fell. Then Panzstott took a long stride and stomped on the archer's head hard enough that Bharv didn't need to hear anything at all. Panzstott glared at Bharv, but turned and ran through the woods.

Bharv scampered to the knight crushed by his horse and kneeled beside him. A groan came from inside the helmet. Bharv lifted the faceplate to see the knight's head was mostly intact.

"Can you hear me?"

The knight nodded.

"Whose sword is that? Why are you chasing us for it?"

"No one's," the knight's voice gurgled. "Everyone's. Celebrate."

Elim kneeled beside them. "Will he live?"

"I'm not a healer, but . . ." Bharv pressed on the knight's chestplate and blood oozed from the seams. "No."

"How many of you idiots are chasing us?" Elim asked.

"Many . . ." The knight's teeth were red and shining.

"Why?" Bharv asked.

"What's the big deal about a sword?"

"Celebrate." The knight was fading. "The names."

"Damn," Elim said.

Bharv looked up with a question on his face and when he looked back down, the knight was dead, his eyes open and fixed. Bharv shut the faceplate and pushed himself up. He wasn't as tired as he should've been. Wasn't as sore in as many places as he should've been.

"He say something I missed?"

"Celebrate," Elim said. "He was talking about the Celebrant, the greatsword Panzstott ran off with. It's a legendary blade, awarded to the

winner of the Grand Tourney held every thousand days. A long tradition, for Free Marchers. Shit. I mean, the damn thing was on a pedestal where hundreds could see, and he still swiped it."

"And the names?"

"More tradition. The name of each winner is inscribed on the blade."

"You know your Grand Tourney history."

"It's a good place to steal. Like a buffet. Well, not anymore. Can't show my face there again, no matter the voice that comes with it. They will not stop chasing us for that blade, Bharv."

"And if they find us without it . . ."

Elim looked at the broken branches and trampled grass that marked Panzstott's escape. "We need that sword."

Bharv grabbed a mace from the knight Panzstott killed, then went through the saddlebags strapped to the fallen horse. Coins rattled and he raised his eyebrows at Elim. She shook her head and pointed at the long dagger on the knight's hip. Bharv unbuckled the belt and passed it to her. He took the knight's canteen, then stood. They walked.

"Big guy was headed this direction when we met him, and he's just as determined now," Bharv said. "He's got a place in mind."

Elim nodded. "There are villages ahead. His Lady Lucie waits in one of them. The smart choice is to wait until the heat dies down before collecting a prize, but that means trusting Panzstott to make decisions on his own." She made a dismissive noise. "I'd bet all the jewels in Thedas his sister is either dead or a Grey Warden by now, lost to her brother either way. The moment this lady has the Celebrant—poof, she is gone."

"And we'll be wanted across Thedas for the rest of our lives." Having his name attached to an infamous theft like this was a millstone around Bharv's neck and a possible blade to his daughters' throats. Vengeful knights would always strive to claim acts of heroic bravery and recovering the Celebrant was a gleaming one. A way to leech tourney glory without even winning. No one knew who Panzstott had talked to. Who knew what he might blurt out a year from now? Bharv couldn't let this follow him home. A retirement looking over his shoulder was no future at all.

It wasn't a very successful last adventure, he supposed. A lost friend and imminent capture was a rough price for any artifact. He'd survived nearly four decades of capers now, started when he had sprouts for hair on his chest, when he assumed he knew the world better. Shit. He'd stepped foot all over Thedas and barely understood the place any deeper

for it. It was a beautiful, terrifying land that surprised him all his life, but he'd stopped trying to find a reason to keep going long ago. It was enough that the world stood itself up. He no longer cared how. Herold would've tried to cheer him up. *This is nothing*, he would've said. *Just a mishap compared to getting chased by the Sandy Howler. A light day after recovering the Everburning Staff of Red Tongues*. They'd lost four eyebrows and two beards between them on that one. A dozen other times, Bharv's only hope had come from Herold. He'd been ridiculously confident every damn time.

"Think we'll make it out of this?" Bharv asked.

"I will," Elim said. She adjusted her pinned hair.

* * *

Panzstott was easy to track. They were gaining, Bharv noticed. The grass the idiot stomped down was still fighting its way back up. Still, they'd nearly lost the sun by the time Panzstott stopped and faced them. Made his meeting, it looked like. Bharv raised his mace as he and Elim strode into the clearing like their name was on the title. The place was well sheltered by a slope on one side and a creek on another. Thick brush above. Only a few minutes of running to hide in the nearest village if things went sour. Panzstott's lady picked her places well.

Panzstott faced them with the Celebrant in both hands. A woman with fiery hair and a black mourning dress stood beside him and sneered. It was a good one, too.

Elim sneered back. Hers was better.

"Well, our useful fools," the woman said in an Orlesian accent. "You two lack the proper grace to die and let us be. I have what is mine; you have stolen your trinket. May we never see each other again."

Bharv and Elim put a few strides between them so Panzstott couldn't get both with one swing. "That sword will hang over all our necks," the elf said. "I have no wish to be famous."

"I will not be denied my family's rewards by two thieves."

"Lords," Elim corrected. "Lords of Fortune."

Bharv studied the woman as she and Elim verbally sparred. She was lighter on one foot than the other, prepared to duck behind Panzstott in a moment. She was a tall woman, only a haircut shorter than Elim, with a dress Bharv thought cost more than his house. The woman was calm in

a tense situation, but what could she want with a greatsword too heavy for her to swing?

"Helping Panzstott find his sister," Bharv said, friendlier than Elim. "Mighty generous of you."

The lady's eyes flicked between the Lords of Fortune, then to Panzstott.

"He mentioned your husband is a Grey Warden," Bharv said. "Now, how long's he been doing that?"

"None of your concern. Flee our mutual pursuers in any direction but mine. Last chance."

"Why not face them together? We have this huge sword on our side. I'm impressed that it's yours. You become Grand Tourney champion, I suppose? Is that what you're trying to sell here?"

"It was him, not me." Lucie's voice cracked. "He was my champion."

Panzstott glanced at the lady. Confusion softened his scowl.

Bharv pieced it together even as the words came out of his mouth.

"You were his wife, weren't you? Sister, maybe. The chevalier who won the last tournament. Jacques Gallais."

Elim snapped her head around. "The chevalier from the memorial?"

The lady flared and jabbed a finger forward. "Do not say his name! Kill them, Panzstott, for your sister's sake."

Bharv tightened his grip on the mace just as Starkhaven guards and tournament knights stepped out of the woods from both clear sides and across the creek. They'd finally abandoned their horses and were far quieter for it. The knights had even taken off their clanging armor. Clever, for once. At the worst possible time, of course.

"Hold!" called a Starkhaven captain. "No one move!"

"Murderers!" the lady yelled. "All of you! You are no knights!"

"My word," the Starkhaven captain said. "Is that Lucie Gallais, wife of departed Jacques? We met at the tournament, after the bereavement ceremony two days ago. Whyever does the tourney widow accuse us?"

She stayed near Panzstott. "Your tournament is a fraud; your knights are cowards. My Jacques, chevalier and hero, earned this sword and none bested him. The spoils remain his, and no dreadful murder in the dark changes that."

The knights scoffed incredulously. One snickered. The captain silenced them with a wave of his hand. "I've never heard mention of foulness in your husband's regrettable passing. Even if there were, your

choice to steal the Celebrant is unacceptable. Guards and knights have died today."

Lucie Gallais hissed at the captain. "You assist cheaters and killers, sir."

"Worst job I ever took," Elim said. Two knights stood behind her, swords drawn.

Panzstott gestured at Elim. "They stole, too. Took a big ruby thing from the tournament."

"You are tattling now?" Elim asked.

The captain wavered at the news and Bharv beamed at their theft having gone unnoticed. Elim's skills were worth every insult she hurled his way. He saw the elf smile. For all they knew, their efforts might still be undiscovered at the tournament grounds. But Panzstott had ruined that now.

"What does the brute speak of?" the captain asked.

"An amulet we stole," Elim said casually. "Big as my fist. Red as the morning sun. We pinched it before this man-child grabbed the sword for his Orlesian lady because she cannot simply get over her husband's death. Priceless, really. Worth far more than your contest trinket. This dwarf has chased it across half the world. His friend died for it. I almost died for it. Cram your puny sword."

Bharv grit his teeth.

"Just kill them, Panzstott," Lucie said. "All of them!"

The captain put up both hands. "Now, wait . . ."

Bharv took a deep breath. Francesca. Melindarah. Sandrine. Bellaclare.

"I no longer even want the damn thing." Elim's hand flicked out of her pocket and tossed Bharv's apple high into the evening air. For a moment, no one moved. Only Bharv spotted the fake and he was still rooted to the spot. Then, in the next moment, everyone in the clearing charged in a different direction. Bharv raised his mace as the Starkhaven captain crashed into him, the younger man's eyes still locked on the apple. The mace spun from Bharv's grasp as they struggled.

"See here . . ."

Bharv slammed his elbow into the captain's throat and shoved him aside. He needed to grab Elim and get out. The rest would take care of itself. With the sword recovered, the knights wouldn't give chase. Not all the way to Rivain. Another Starkhaven guard tackled him and Bharv

spun into a tree on his way down. The two of them rolled and grappled as Bharv tried to avoid the guard's dagger.

A knight reached the rolling apple and Elim kicked him in the face as he crouched to pick it up. She planted her other foot, pushed back, and drove her elbow into the guard chasing her. His nose splintered against her forearm and he fell with a wet, miserable howl.

"Uncivilized . . ." she muttered.

Bharv rolled from under the Starkhaven guard to see Panzstott send knights diving in all directions to avoid his mighty swipes of the Celebrant. He was quicker than he looked, and his reach kept the knights moving instead of engaging. Panzstott hacked at one man who veered too close and blood sprayed against Bharv's face, blurring his vision as it splashed in his eyes. The guard he'd been wrestling lurched after him and Bharv felt something hot across his chest. Warmth poured down his belly.

"The brute!" someone yelled. "Focus on the brute!"

"Kill them, Panzstott!"

Bharv rolled over and the world rolled with him. The treetops above him spun until the dim sky was a perfect circle. He pulled his hand from his chest and looked at it. It was sticky and red. His breaths gurgled through his shirt and he gripped the amulet tightly in his pocket. Elim screamed and he lifted his head. His mouth opened, but no sound came out.

Panzstott held Elim, feet off the ground, with one hand around her throat and sawed deep into her side with the Celebrant. She screamed and kicked. His face was like a sad little boy's.

Elim pulled out her long hairpin and slammed the point of it up under Panzstott's chin. The big man's teeth clacked together as his mouth was pinned shut, biting off most his tongue. Elim kept going, pushing as high as she could, until his eyes rolled and he went limp. The Celebrant dropped beside them. They both collapsed to the ground.

In the sudden silence, Bharv listened to the guards pick themselves up and tend to their wounded.

"Collect the sword," the captain said. "Bind the widow's hands."

"The thieves, Captain?"

The captain clucked disgustedly as he considered the question. "Leave them to die. It will be enough struggle getting our own wounded back to Starkhaven."

As the guards left, Bharv lay still and wondered how much blood he'd put on the forest floor. Once they were gone, he got to his knees. Elim was on her back, propped on both elbows. Neither mentioned how much the other was bleeding. The whole clearing was tilted, the trees at weird angles.

"This is a real shit job," he told Elim.

"Worst I ever took." Red spilled down her chin. "I would've liked to know what that damn amulet does, besides look pretty."

Bharv opened his mouth—Francesca. Melindarah. Sandrine. Bellaclare. They all agreed.—and closed it again.

Elim's elbows gave out and she lay back.

The world spun and Bharv felt the ground against his face.

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The moon was high when Bharv woke again. He gasped the cold air and could see his breath against the stars. He jolted upright and grabbed at his shirt. His wounds were closed, already healed to crooked purple welts across his chest. He yanked the amulet from his pocket and stumbled through the grass to Elim. He pulled open her coat. The elf's jacket shone dull red in the moonlight. She was cold.

Bharv held the amulet against her side. He spent the night that way, hoping the amulet would resurrect her. When his fingers went frigid and numb, he sat down and held the amulet against her body with his back. He thought about what he'd kept from Elim, about the makeshift hospitals in the north and how Herold stared at the wounded until Bharv dragged him away. As he shivered in the night air, Bharv wondered how long Herold had known they were chasing a healing amulet. Once pink finally threaded through the sky, Bharv let the amulet drop, rolled onto his back next to Elim, and watched the sunrise.

"Real shit job," he said.

***

Bharv circled the bar in the nearest village downriver three times while he tried to spot any warning signs. Place looked the same as when he and Herold got drunk inside on their way to Starkhaven days before. Of course Herold had been casing the spot as a potential meeting place.

Bharv should've known. There was a pattern to Herold's plans and a meeting place he trusted was always part of it. Bharv was certain he'd figured this plan out—even the twist his friend kept to himself. Herold or Elim would've done a smoother job tying this off, but he owed it to both of them to see it through before he fled the Free Marches as fast as his stumpy legs could take him. Good riddance to the whole pile of shit and their damn tournament. Get over the hill and gone already. Home, like he'd so often promised.

There were already a few customers inside the Bloody Mirth when Bharv trudged through the doors. Either the drinkers were mighty early or impressively late. Bharv couldn't argue with that. He planned to live in bars from here to Rivain, two cups an order all the way home. At the main bar, a tall knight with a salty beard and a Ferelden accent told a story to four other customers. He was good at it, too, filling in details that proved he'd been places rather than just hearing about them. Bharv nearly stopped to listen.

"Something?" the bartender called.

"Big. Make it two." He paid his coins and grabbed both dirty glasses. The tables past the bar were empty except for one elf whom Bharv assumed was the "squire" Herold mentioned in drunken stories and accidently spilled the beans about to Panzstott. Her eyes flicked to the front door, then the storyteller, as Bharv approached. He sat and slopped his drinks on the table. For a moment, he glanced at the opposite corner, near the largest window, where he and Herold had sung only two nights before.

"This is not a good time." The young elf wrinkled her nose at his stink. "I'm expecting someone."

Bharv enjoyed finally sitting down too much to answer right away.

The elf glared at him. "I am trying to be polite. I am not interested in you or your drink."

"Good, because neither's on offer. These are both mine. You know, Herold said you were kind." He raised his first glass and drank an astonishing amount in one mouthful.

Her surprise showed. "Bharv?"

"Vaea. Nice to meet you."

"Herold . . ."

Bharv looked down with a solemn nod.

Vaea closed her eyes. She let him take another few swallows before she spoke again. “He talked about you a lot. Said you were the same kind of stupid he was.”

Bharv nodded. “It’s the kind that’s the most fun. He talked about you, too, a bit.”

She sighed. “He wasn’t supposed to talk about me at all. Telling that man secrets was like writing them on your horse and slapping it on the arse.”

Bharv chuckled. So that’s whom Herold had stolen the expression from.

“Did he tell you our arrangement?”

Bharv wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “I figured enough of it out, I reckon. Enough to know that when I slide this amulet across the table, no money’s coming back in the other direction.”

Vaea nodded. “He contacted me and said a job of his had turned into a charity run. Asked me to bring the amulet back north with me, to Tevinter. The chaos there has left many in desperate need, a lot of families torn up. He said you’d understand.”

“I should’ve known those makeshift hospitals got to him. Softhearted little shit.”

She smiled. “He talked the same way about you.”

Bharv handed her the amulet he’d wrapped in sackcloth. “Hold it yourself the entire way. Keep it close.”

The elf poked the sack with one finger. “Does it work?”

“Only on the living.” Bharv drank until there was only a half-thumb of swill left in his second cup. He raised it high, his arm trembling and his bottom lip gone between his teeth.

Vaea raised the empty glass. “To the Lords of Fortune. To Herold. Our friend.”

Bharv’s smile and tears broke at the same time. “To Herold. He never met a giant snake he wouldn’t wrestle. Long may he adventure.”

AN OLD CROW'S OLD TRICKS

ARONE LE BRAY

She watched the sun setting over the Nocen Sea, flashing bright orange off the lightly cresting waves. This was Chencel's favorite part of the day. It was always peaceful just downhill from the camp. Activity up there was still winding down for the night. Smiling, she lifted her spear off the ground and continued her patrol.

Chencel allowed herself a brief moment of pride. Not just any Tevinter soldier was given the task of setting up a defensive site like this. The Imperium couldn't chance letting those ox-men from Seheron make landfall here. So if the Imperium trusted her centuri to keep this area safe, and her centurion trusted her to keep their perimeter safe, then she would ensure that trust was earned.

Without taking more than a few steps, she spotted the second reason this was her favorite time of day. A small figure was approaching. Her bulky pack forced the old crone into a hunch, driving her into the ground with every step on the grassy hillside.

"Good evening, Old Nan!" Chencel called. She removed her helmet, her hair falling into her face. She roughly planted her spear into the ground next to her, annoyed at the coarse brown follicles tickling her nose but glad to be free of her slightly too large helmet, even if only for a few moments. As much as she might want to walk over to see what was for sale today, she knew better than to leave her post. Qunari were tricky.

Even from this distance, Chencel could hear the crone's wheezing breath. She almost felt sorry for the poor thing. Each day, she showed up with a pack that was just as large as the day before. And her clothes were little more than ragged brown-gray robes tied with strips of brightly colored cloth, as though those were the only clothes she had. But her eyes reminded Chencel of her own grandmother's, kind and wrinkled in the corners. They were the eyes of someone who has lived a long life, laughing for most of it. She appeared just after the first tents went up, and she had been coming back every day at this time for the last few weeks. Due to these nightly encounters, Chencel was making a small fortune reselling the old woman's wares.

"What have you got for me today?" She reached out her hand to offer balance. Chencel's gloved hand almost enveloped the older woman's. She was always surprised by how calloused a merchant's hands could get, but it made sense given how much strength it must take to lug her pack around the way she did.

Old Nan's face cracked into her familiar smile. "First," Old Nan breathed heavily, "tell me how we did today." With her free hand she slung the pack from her shoulder and placed it on the ground, then tapped it enticingly with her tiny fingers.

Chencel chuckled. "Fine, fine." She reached into the sack at her waist, pulling out some coins. "I was able to get a few silvers for your cookies from some of the younger soldiers. Too sweet for me. And once I showed off my own stylish pouch," she gestured to where it hung on her belt, "I managed to get a few orders for more, if you have them. The quality is decent, and a good soldier always has an eye out for quality."

"Ah, those are similar to some Dalish packs I remember seeing when I was younger. I tried to make them from memory, but these are still just pale imitations."

The soldier rolled her eyes and spit in the dirt, dumping her handful of coins into the merchant's hand before releasing it. "Those knife-ears? If they knew anything decent, they wouldn't be scrabbling about in the woods, wasting their time pining after long-dead 'gods' and drawing swirls all over their faces. The only good rabbits are either dead or cleaning up after a magister's grand ball."

Old Nan's smile faltered a moment. "Oh, no. Then you might not be too interested in what I have today, my dear. I was able to trade for some fabrics from a passing aravel and made some lovely scarves." She moved

to meet Chencel's gaze, her brows upturned in a worried expression. "I even made sure to save something specifically for you."

"Have you, now?" A sly grin broke out on Chencel's face. She knew that the crafty seller was just trying to goad her into showing enthusiasm to get a better price. However, given the quality of her other goods, this might be too good to pass up. "Well, maybe I can forgive you for trading with those . . . things, then. What have you got for me?"

"It's nothing much, really, but . . ." She flipped the cover off her large pack and reached deep inside. She was in it all the way up to her shoulder, and Chencel heard her rummaging around in the various fabrics and the faint metallic *twangs* of whatever it was she kept in there. "I hope you'll like this." She smiled, her grasping hands finding what she was looking for, and pulled out a long shimmering length of fabric. "It's halla wool, woven into a long scarf. Soft to the touch, very smooth. Any gaps in the weave are so small they're guaranteed not to catch on anything." She let it play lightly on her fingers to show that it wasn't catching on her calloused knuckles at all. "Not only that, but it feels cool in the summer and warm in the winter."

"Halla? Those beasts with the horns?"

"My dear, the fabric is so light! I thought this would be perfect for you. I hate when I see you take off your helmet each day and your beautiful hair hides your face. I can also see the spots where your skin chafes against the interior. There, just at your temples, and also there, behind your ears. Please?" Her hands trembled slightly as she held it out toward Chencel, gesturing to the points where the helmet did cause minor irritations.

With a sigh, Chencel removed her glove so that she could take the item from Old Nan. It was as soft as she said it would be, and it felt so light that it almost weighed nothing at all. She folded it up and pinched it between her index finger and her thumb, feeling how much give the fabric could offer as a buffer between her skin and the cold metal helmet. She made a show of bending in to sniff the material, giving Old Nan a sideways glance as she did so. There wasn't even a hint of a smell other than the faint aroma of baked goods that seemed to go with everything the matronly woman sold. Still, Chencel wrinkled her nose and forcefully threw the scarf away from her.

"Pfah!" she exclaimed, feigning disgust. "Did you get this halla wool from a Dalish camp? They never get all the stink out. And you want me

to wear this on my head? How dare you?"

Old Nan reacted quickly, deftly plucking the scarf out of the air before it had the chance to reach the ground. Chencel was a little surprised to see the small woman move so quickly. It was almost like she uncoiled like a spring for a moment to reach it.

"Please, if you would permit me, would you let me show you how well it works? Please, dearie?" The fact that she threw in a pet name was not lost on Chencel. It was clear to her that she really wanted to make this sale.

Chencel had to stop herself from laughing. Even in the center of the Imperium, a garment like this could fetch a high price. And even if she didn't want to keep it, she could easily resell it to someone in the camp for a modest profit, enough to keep her in good spirit, and delicious spirits, for a long while.

"Fine." Chencel sighed, putting her glove back on. "I'll try it on, but try not to make me gag from the stench."

The old woman smiled, then moved behind Chencel, unraveling the scarf as she went. She started humming a little song to herself as she went about her business.

"Do you need me to kneel down a bit?" Chencel asked, slightly mockingly, as she planted her spear on the ground and then rested her hand on the hilt. She did begin to move a bit lower to match Old Nan's height. The older woman gave no response, but Chencel could feel her hands taking hold of her hair and pulling it into a bun atop her head. The scarf was quite soft, and she almost didn't even feel how it was holding her tresses up. "What is that song you're humming? It's familiar, but I can't quite place—"

Chencel felt the strong fabric tighten around her throat, cutting off the rest of her sentence. A sharp kick to the back of her leg drove her to her knees and she lost her grip on her spear. She scrabbled with her fingers to find purchase on the fabric and pull it away from her neck, but it was so soft and slick that she could find nothing to grip.

"I learned it from a good friend, long ago. According to him, it's a Dalish tune that used to be sung by children in a camp not far from here." The kind tone of the old woman's voice was still present, but now it was carefully tempered and measured, the tone one would use to chastise a small child who would not be quiet. "The children would sing

this song as they collected water and played in the stream. Do you remember now?"

Chencel remembered. On their way to set up camp here, the centuri had encountered some Dalish children from an aravel. Her centurion, Magister Bicklius, ordered the whole group wiped out so that the centuri would have no competition for resources in the area. Chencel had to catch the child who started to run, so that he would not warn the rest.

"His mother called him Sil. He was twelve. You held him under the water." Chencel still struggled, but the older woman's grip was too strong. "Did he fight back? While his breath left him, and you held his shoulders to keep him still, did he thrash? Kick? Try to scratch or bite?"

The soldier's arms started to go limp.

"Did you know that the Oranavra clan also sold their goods? They even made enough to purchase a contract from the Antivan Crows." Chencel was almost beyond the point of hearing, but the older woman obviously knew what she was doing. "Lessef of the Antivan Crows has fulfilled the contract."

Chencel felt her limp body being pulled upright, then some small tugs as she was tied to her own spear. Lessef released the scarf so that the weight of the soldier's own body against the spear continued to choke her. As her sight dimmed, the last thing she saw was the sun completely set beyond the Nocen Sea, turning the whitecaps into a series of sparkling, brilliant red and orange flashes.

Moments later, anyone looking at this area from the camp would see a lone perimeter guard, leaning on her spear, gazing solemnly across the water.

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"Salentin, are you taking a break?" Penteri inquired, casting an accusing eye toward his subordinate. The sun was setting, and Penteri and this new recruit still had more than a few tents to set up before the remainder of the camp arrived in the morning.

"Please, sir, may I light a fire?" The young soldier turned to face his superior, rubbing his hands. "I promise I'll keep going, but I don't know if my hands are numb from cold or if my arms are just giving up on me. Also, the ropes are so cold that it's getting hard to work with them, sir." Salentin's voice had a pleading quality to it that sickened Penteri. He was

the laziest soldier he had ever worked with and this seemed like just another chance to complain.

"You have five minutes," Penteri snarled, "but I have no issues with making you work through the night. I don't care if you can't feel your arms of if they fall right off—we don't stop until our task is complete, soldier."

"Yes, sir." Salentin's face brightened as he moved to pile logs for a fire. Penteri noted that he was moving a bit faster now that he was doing something he wanted to do.

Penteri looked around at their handiwork. He wouldn't admit it, but that fire was starting to sound like a good idea. Any extra light would be helpful at this point. Because they were setting up the canvas tents and moving farther from the center of camp, the torches hadn't been placed here yet. It would be dangerous to use torches out here with all these flammable structures and no one to watch over them.

Looking at Salentin's back, he imagined how good it would feel to have actual peers around again. This pathetic soldier was little more than a scrap of a man, barely old enough to shave. His close-cropped blond hair and round face combined with his near-constant whining to make him seem even more of a child. Penteri couldn't help but feel cheated. He couldn't wait until tomorrow, when the rest of the centuri would start to file in and raucous laughter and voices would make it difficult to feel alone. His fondest memories were when he would sit around the camp at night with his friends trading tales, drinking, and treating themselves to their day's rations. Sometimes the older soldiers would make the rounds and talk about the good old days, fighting off darkspawn and forcing them back into their holes, scouring the countryside for knife-ears and keeping their lands safe for the Imperium, or even finding the occasional apostate group to quash.

It was well and truly dark now, and Salentin's fire was essentially the only light visible. The skies had clouded over once the sun left, and a dense fog from the Nocen Sea was making it feel as dark as it looked. The flames dancing in front of the young soldier cast flickering and jumping shadows all over the clearing, making it look like each tent had someone inside it performing some kind of frenzied dance in the firelight.

"Sir," Salentin's plaintive voice started, "I'm sorry, but I think I'm injured." He turned to look at Penteri and held out his finger where it

appeared a piece of wood had lodged itself into the flesh of his fingertip. Something in the way that Salentin looked at him finally caused the dam to burst.

"A . . . splinter?!" Penteri exploded. "A *splinter!* When the Antaam attack, do you think that you can just whine at them to stop carving through your skin? Will you be able to cover the soldier next to you with your mewling complaints instead of holding up your shield?" He drew the sword at his hip and lunged menacingly at Salentin's face, forcing him to fall on his backside and look even more like a child. "This causes more damage than a small chunk of wood in your finger!"

He had to turn away from Salentin, his shoulders shaking, and resheathed his weapon. If he kept looking in the direction of the boy, it was likely that he would do something he might regret. He took a few deep breaths, slowly inhaling and exhaling. The only sounds were Penteri's heavy breathing, and the occasional crackle of the logs in the fire.

"Sir, I'm sorry, I'll get back to work. You're right, this is nothing, it's small. I'm sorry sir, I'll—"

"Stop." Without turning around, Penteri relaxed his hand on his weapon. "Recruit Salentin," he began, "I am going to speak very slowly and clearly so that there is no chance you will misunderstand me. Ever since I was saddled with the task of training you, I keep coming back to the same problem." He took another deep breath. He could hear Salentin behind him, shifting on the ground. Likely sitting down again like the lazy child he is, Penteri thought.

"You're not a soldier. You wear the uniform and you know the drills, but you're not a soldier. I am embarrassed by you, that you might be seen as someone that young children should aspire to be. You are a disgrace, and this is your last night of service. Tomorrow morning, I'm going to Magister Bicklius and recommend that he strip you of your rank; then I'm going to personally delight in stripping you of everything you owe to the Imperium and driving you from this defensive front. Maybe you can find some farmer out there to take pity on you and your splinter. I will lose absolutely no sleep in making this decision. It's weak and cowardly people like you that get good soldiers killed. I'm thankful only that I am removing you from my centuri before combat."

He turned to look back at Salentin. The youth had turned back to face the fire. He was now fully seated, legs in front of him, his arms

sitting on his lap, and his head hanging low.

"Do I make myself clear?"

Penteri waited for a response, but none was forthcoming.

"Salentin," he growled, pounding his feet into the earth as he closed the distance between them, "I am still your superior until the sun rises again, and you will respond to me as such! I said, do I make myself clear?"

As he spat out the last word, he reached down to grip Salentin by the shoulder and yanked, whipping him about so that they would be face-to-face. Salentin's body flailed at the force of Penteri's action, his arms making a sickening *thwack* as each limb struck the ground. A long, thin red line wrapped almost all the way around Salentin's neck, and blood had spilled down the front of his chest. His head lolled to the side and then back so that he was staring up at his commander. The flames continued to dance, light glinting off his eyes, providing stark contrast to the inner light that was there just a few minutes ago.

"Lessef of the Antivan Crows has fulfilled the contract."

The woman's voice cut through the silence and brought Penteri back to his senses. He immediately drew his weapon and looked around for where it had come from.

"A Crow? Here?" He whirled on his heels, feeling every muscle in his body ache. It had been a long day of hauling poles and heavy fabrics, then assembling them, and in the chill night air he was feeling every bit of it. The adrenaline of seeing Salentin's corpse was already beginning to fade, letting numbness settle in.

"Oranavra," the voice came again from the darkness. He turned, still unable to place its origin. "Do you remember?"

He kept silent, and frantically wiped the cold sweat from his brow. Maybe if he kept quiet, he might hear her and place her location before she had a chance to strike. But the firelight cast his own shadows all around him, and the folds of the tents and the blank spaces between them created any number of dark crevices where she could hide.

"Do you remember, Legate Penteri? The Dalish couple. Clan Oranavra. Do you remember?"

"You and your subordinate here walked into their home and and pulled him out of their panicked embrace. When he started to protest, you cut him down, cleaving him from shoulder to heart. Do you remember?"

Penteri's hands felt damp with sweat inside his gloves despite the chill of the night. The hilt of his sword rested uneasily in his moist grip. He started to slowly spin around, searching the blank spaces. Any one of them could hold a Crow dagger. There was no way for him to know where the attack would come from. His breathing got heavier and tremors in his arms caused his blade to shake.

Suddenly, a pain shot through his left leg. It exploded upward from the back of his ankle through his kneecap. He couldn't stop himself from crying out, or from dropping his weapon and collapsing to the ground, his good leg bent at the knee while his hands felt for the wound. An almost needle-thin blade had pierced through the back of his ankle, narrowly missing the bone and passing all the way through his leg.

"Do you remember?" The voice was higher, almost sounding pleased, and the unmistakable sound of a giggle hung in the air.

"Yes, yes, I remember!" he almost screamed. "Then she started to run and I had Salentin shoot her. He missed, and the arrow struck her leg. Magister Bicklius ordered me to go after her. He ordered me!"

"You chased her through the woods, taunting her. You knew she wouldn't be able to get away. Did he order you to do that?"

The small fire was already starting to burn down into embers. Penteri looked up across the fire to see an old, squat woman in rags enter the clearing. Her smile was wide, another needle-sharp knife effortlessly being flipped end over end in one hand, and a pack held loosely by a worn strap in the other. Her eyes were shining, sparkling in the firelight, and her face was wrinkled like that of someone who rarely stopped smiling and spent a large part of their many years laughing.

"Please," he begged, "please. I just followed orders. You want Magister Bicklius! You can just let me go!"

She continued smiling, slowly walking toward Penteri, keeping the dying embers between them. "I might. Let's see." With that, she dropped her pack directly onto the fire. Penteri had time to see the canvas split, and a large amount of liquid burst forth, before the flames were quenched. His eyes were useless as the area was plunged into inky black.

Penteri had to get away. He had already lost track of where his weapon fell. And he wouldn't be able to run. Not with his injury. He scraped his palms and knees trying to crawl as quickly as possible. He turned toward what he hoped was the center of the camp. Maybe he

could find help there? He attempted to stand, but his left leg was less than useless. Unable to control himself, his body let the sound of a pained intake of air escape, and he tumbled. He landed face-first against rough canvas and knew he had made it out of the clearing. He struggled to regain his balance, but he kept falling. He was getting tangled. Ropes, canvas, and poles wound around his limbs, trapping him in an embrace he couldn't escape. He kept turning around and around, hoping that he might find some way out.

Tears started to stream down his face as he finally came to rest, looking up to the clouded sky. His eyes were beginning to adapt, and he could see that he had not moved far from where he started. Some embers of the firepit had regained their glow, and he could see the lumpy outline of Salentin sprawled along the ground.

"Lessef of the Antivan Crows has fulfilled the contract."

He turned his head to the side to see Lessef standing just next to him, his own sword held high above her head in both hands, pointed straight down. Before he could think about anything else it fell, rapidly plunging into his chest and pinning him to the ground. He couldn't contain an abrupt cough, and blood burbled from his lips as the last of the air left his lungs. He tried to reach for the blade, but his arms were still trapped beneath the heavy canvas and tent debris. He could only stare as the old woman, still smiling, slowly backed away from him and blended back into the darkness.

Anyone coming upon the scene in the morning light would find a young soldier by the fire, a new recruit who had died at his post. Meanwhile, his superior officer appeared to have fallen and trapped himself while attempting to flee, impaled on his own weapon.

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It was the silence that woke him first.

For seventeen years, Magister Bicklius felt more at home in a bustling, rough military camp than he did in the stylish, worn streets of his home in Ventus. The sound of a soldier rasping his blade against a whetstone muffled by his tent walls made for a much better lullaby than the sound of boot heels on cobbled stones outside his window. Even the soft clinking of his guards as they made their rounds in chainmail caused him to smile as he drifted off.

But now, there was nothing. Even with the bulk of his forces arriving in the morning, the camp should still be alive with the sound of his men and women outside going about their nightly tasks.

He lay still, fully awake, and slowed his breathing so that he could focus. He opened one eye slightly. Still dark. Minimal moonlight. Dawn was still fairly far off. Still definitely too quiet.

Across his bare face he felt a small, almost intangible whiff of a breeze. Someone had just entered his space.

Instantly he was up, using a Fade step to move out of his bed at the far end of the room and into a wooden chair just to the right of the tent's entrance. Simultaneously, he flipped a miniscule fireball up to the ceiling of his tent, catching the wick of his lamp.

He turned in his chair to face toward the door to see who would have the gall to intrude upon his space, and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, peering at this new presence. "And who shall I say is calling?" His voice rumbled low in his chest, and he smiled a thin-lipped grin.

Bicklius knew that he cut an imposing figure. While he was not much taller than five feet, he made a point of making sure that he would not be overlooked. He had no control over his height, but he had complete control over what he could do with his physique. Unlike his peers who looked only to their magic, he spent most of his life honing both his mind and body. Magic, he knew, meant relying on the Fade and the creatures within it. But physical strength was inherent.

In this light and in this pose, Bicklius could almost be mistaken for a small boulder come to life. He took great care to make sure that he was always freshly shaved so that he would not be bothered with wasting time on petty preening. His dark brown eyes shone from beneath the shadow of his looming brow, set above chiseled cheekbones. His restained grin hid his teeth, lips curling at the edges of his small mouth, framed by his immense square jaw. He consciously flexed and relaxed, knowing that it made his corded muscles pulse in the lamplight. Years of physical exertion had honed his body into a machine of precision. His chair was designed so that his looming forward like this would emphasize his imposing physique, broad and powerful. He planted his legs firmly on the floor, rough-hewn obelisks supporting this small giant. Bare from the waist up, his massive frame was covered only by a small

pair of loose shorts. He couldn't wait to see the look on this intruder's face.

Like him, she was also small in stature, but similarity ended there. While he looked ready for a hurricane, she would surely blow over in a stiff breeze. She was barefoot, her mottled skin visible and liver-spotted at her ankles. She was unkempt, wild-eyed, and wearing what appeared to be brightly colored rags. He had to give her credit, though. She was crouching, unflinching, in front of him, less than ten feet away. And there was something about the way she held that dagger in her hand . . .

"Ah," he said, leaning back in his chair, reaching for a bottle from his dining table, realization dawning. "Crow, yes?" The wizened woman's face twitched for a moment. He had caught her. "Should I assume that if I were to call, my guards would not be able to come?" He uncorked the bottle and poured a small amount of wine into two small crystal glasses.

The old Crow hadn't moved since he'd lit the lamp, but her eyes followed his every move.

"Please, come have a drink with me. I assure you, the vintage is quite good." He sipped from his own glass. "If you haven't noticed, while I have only a few possessions here with me, I make up for the quantity with quality. For example, when you enter my tent you would likely first look to your left at that war table." He gestured to the large object next to the woman. "When I obtained my first command, I had that commissioned. It was once a single piece of wood, but I had it hollowed. It doubles as not only my war table for planning strikes and defenses, but also as a chest for all of my belongings. I like to make good use of space, you see. No doubt you also noted the carvings upon it? That is a record of my career. From when I first picked up a spear as a green recruit, saving my squad from a darkspawn raid that felled our commander, all the way through our last raid I led that routed a whole aravel of knife-ears who took up residence in Tevinter lands. Actually," he gave a brief snort, "I think I may need to commission a new chest and retire this one. Getting a little difficult to find free space."

She continued to stand her ground, unflinching and unresponsive.

"If you aren't impressed by that, what about the armor stand near my cot?" He gestured to the back of the tent. "Naturally, I had to have it specially designed. In fact, you can see that the gauntlets are barely used! I tend to enjoy just leaving my hands bare in combat so that I can really

feel every blow. In fact, one of your previous compatriots and I bonded over that before I crushed his throat. Good man."

Still nothing.

"Or maybe, just maybe, you noticed the support, didn't you?" He nodded toward the post in the center of the tent. The post itself was a stout wooden beast, wrapped in layers of fur, linen, and leather. The wrapping was worn and beaten, patched and repaired in various places. "In case you were wondering, yes, that is exactly what it looks like. I require that every camp be started by placing that post. It is solid wood, one yard in diameter, and it is buried four feet into the ground. Then it is wrapped, and the camp is built around me while I strike the padding." He snorted. "Once, it wasn't solid enough and it hadn't been planted firmly enough by some young recruit. After an hour, I knocked it free and my tent fell. Oh, we laughed. Or rather, I laughed. And then I found the responsible party. He put on his toughest leathers and I used him in place of the pole until it had been replaced." He sighed. "Poor fellow. Died of a collapsed lung, I believe." He curled his right hand into a fist and then relaxed it, remembering the feel of bone breaking as he pounded on the chest of the recruit, beating him into the ground and leaving him coughing blood. Nothing else felt quite like it. He almost wished that it would happen again. If nothing else, it was a nice lesson to leave imprinted on his people. The post never so much as wobbled in the ground after that.

"I have to admit, you definitely aren't like the others. Usually when they send a Crow, it's someone much more . . . impressive. You know the type—bird-masked, jester motley, ornate, flashy, semi-useless weapons? I heard that your lot like putting on shows. But you, you're different, aren't you?" He sipped his drink and gestured that she should take the other glass. "You are aware that you aren't the first one to come after me, yes? I am a magister. There is no small number of people who would like to see me dead. So who was it this time? A cousin, a rival house, a slighted lover?"

She pointed to the chest, at the depiction of Magister Bicklius standing in front of a burning aravel.

"Those Dalish? And you're the best they could afford?" His grin grew and he almost started to snort with laughter when he noticed that something was different.

The image used to show Bicklius triumphant, proudly standing in front of the aravel as it burned, smiling as he strode through the wreckage . . . Now, some of the wood on the chest was freshly scored, newly carved. The fresh shavings sat below the image. The fire was still vibrant, but Bucklius was now depicted as part of the conflagration, his triumphant visage twisted into a grimace of pain, his face turned to the skies in a silent scream.

All mirth abruptly left him. "What did you do?" His voice was soft, low, and chill.

"Do you remember, magister?" This slight woman's face crinkled at the edges of her eyes, taking on a grandmotherly appearance. "Do you recall, dear, the warmth of the fire as you burned the leader of the aravel? Her howls of pain as you burned her alive in her own home? Or do you only remember taking this?" She shifted her robes slightly, coming to her full height and extending her hand. Bicklius hadn't seen her stow her dagger or where this object came from, but he did recognize the halla statue. "This ironbark halla is the symbol of Ghilan'nain. The Oranavra didn't even remember how they came to own it, but they believed that she would protect them. As long as they kept this halla safe, she would watch over them, guide them to new fertile lands to grow food, new areas to hunt, and beautiful lands to raise their children. They trusted her, and you stole her. You stole everything from them." She paused, holding his gaze.

"My name is Lessef, and I have fulfilled this contract."

Bicklius roared with anger and leapt across the tent, massive hands balled into bulky fists. He came for her quickly and put all his weight into a left-handed gut punch.

Lessef moved with inhuman speed, dropping to the ground, and causing his full force to solidly strike the chest behind her. He felt the knuckles in his left hand explode in a starburst of pain. He had broken enough bones to know that he had at least fractured two bones, possibly three.

He shrugged it off and turned to face her. She had leapt toward his bed at the back of the tent, next to his armor.

He turned on his heel and pressed the attack a second time. His refused to be caught off guard again. His arms began to glow with arcane energy as he directed his magic and body to work in concert. Some mages liked the feel and look of an arcane blade, but Bicklius preferred

the closeness of a grapple. He liked the feel of calling a thin arcane weapon into being around his fists, the magic licking around his arms and fists as he used the magic weapon to clutch a limb and crush it in his grasp. He loved the feel of a last gasp of air in his face.

He flew toward Lessef, right arm cocked, and delivered a punishing blow at her head. She dodged again, impossibly fast, and Bicklius watched in horror as his arcane weapon shimmered and fell away, leaving his fist exposed as she tipped the armor stand forward and his naked skin met the metal of his helmet. Too late to react, he could only watch as his right hand nearly shattered, bone breaking through skin, as his beautifully constructed helmet dented and destroyed his fingers.

He screamed and clutched the bloody remnants to his chest.

Lessef moved alongside him, putting herself at his back as she whispered into his ear, "It was the lamp oil, dear."

He cast his eyes up, still grimacing. It felt like most of his strength was leaving him, all at once, and he wanted nothing more than to just curl up on the ground, wearier than if he had marched in full plate mail for days.

The opening in his tent that usually let smoke escape had been sealed shut with bright strips of cloth, just like the rags on the crone. Smoke curled lazily out of his lamp, and then cascaded down like a waterfall of vapor.

"Many people in Antiva enjoy the heady feeling of the herb, but I must confess that the first time you use it has the greatest effect. After a while you grow accustomed to the mellow lethargy that suffuses the body, but that first joyous slumber is so peaceful. How do you feel, dear? Shall I tuck you in?"

Bicklius looked around and spotted his long sword, still laying in its scabbard next to the tipped armor stand. With a wordless roar of rage he grabbed the weapon in his left hand and whirled around, swinging with every last ounce of energy he could, eyes clenched shut in exertion.

He felt it bite and hold, deep in his target, and he felt a moment of relief.

Then he felt a rough, wrinkled palm caress his cheek, and he opened his eyes.

"Lessef of the Antivan Crows has fulfilled the contract."

His arm was wrapped in tattered cloth, tied fast to the hilt of his sword. Her eyes had some pity in them, but her smile was still there,

mocking him. Even as depleted as he felt, his wild swing had managed to cleave through half of the support pole, each layer giving way until it splintered the wood, and finally stuck.

He felt his knees go weak and he collapsed, still attached to the weapon, and he heard the creaking as the pole began to crack. The fabric of the tent above him sagged, drooping, and he watched as the old woman padded out the door, leaving without so much as a glance in his direction.

"Wait," he mumbled, his lips moving like thick worms and his tongue clumsy in his mouth. "You can't leave me like this. You can't just—"

The pole gave way completely, and the canvas fell. The sword was now free, but he didn't have the energy to fight against the weight of his tent. He heard some glass shatter, and then felt wetness around him.

The oil from his lamp was everywhere.

"No," he breathed out, trying to muster the energy to move himself, racking his mind for a spell that would help, "No, I can't—NO!"

He managed to pull himself up to his knees before the oil caught full flame, billowing around him. He tried to scream but the air was thick with choking smoke, and his mouth would only open and close, gasping for air that wouldn't, that couldn't, come.

His body would be found, still kneeling, his mouth agape in a silent scream.

* * *

Tainsley raised his weary gaze to the west and spotted the signal he was looking for. The black night sky was illuminated by flames coming from the Tevinter camp. It was time to go to work.

With a heavy wheeze and a sigh, the elderly human rose from the bottom of his small vessel. Reaching his full seven-foot height, he stretched his arms and legs, kneading the muscles with his aged hands to start the blood flowing again. Once the tingling sensations subsided, he reached out to the oars and began rowing toward the beach. He had been having a lovely daydream about relaxing at home in front of the hearth, a cup of brandy warming him from the inside out, but there wasn't time for that now. Mistress Lessef was going to be coming down that hill any moment.

His boat lurched to a stop as he beached it, and his old bones protested. He straightened, took a deep breath, and felt his chest expand with air, his ribs cracking as it wheezed out again. He knew he might look like a monstrous apparition, seven feet tall and wrapped in wiry, taut muscles, but he still felt every bit of his seventy-six years weighing him down.

"That woman is going to be the death of me," he moaned. He put both hands against the small of his back and arched, the sound of creaking echoing out over the water. He was already perspiring, which was causing his long white hair to fall into his eyes. He hated how every time they left to go and do one of these jobs, the mistress would always force him to wear his hair long.

"It's more barbaric," he imitated a high, squeaking voice. *"And you look so handsome."* He shuddered, remembering how she would leer after him and sometimes run her hands through his hair. It always irked him, and he suspected that she liked doing it primarily because of the sour expression it forced to his face.

As cold as he was, he knew it was about to get worse.

He looked down into the belly of the boat and saw a bit of metal reflecting the firelight from the encampment, even from this distance. "Stupid, shiny, heavy, dumb, obstinate, plate mail," he hissed. It was so incredibly heavy, and it limited his movement. He felt like a slow-moving crab inside it, just waiting for someone to come along and crack it open to get at the tender meat inside. The legs were tight against his thighs and calves and made it so that he couldn't run, then the chest piece would dig into his hips if he bent the wrong way, and the arms . . . The arms were horrible. He would much rather just wear plain cloth or, at worst, boiled leather, but the mistress insisted that this was required.

"She just wants me to be uncomfortable," he muttered, and reached down for the final piece of this disgusting ensemble. The horned helmet. "Who puts horns on a helmet like this, anyway? They'll just get caught, and they make you look like an idiot. Stupid helmet. Stupid armor. Stupid—" His train of thought was cut off by a shrill shriek coming from the camp.

"Sten! Sten, shok basra vashedan taam! Teth a! Noms daar vat!"

Tainsley turned to see Lessef barreling down the hill at breakneck speed, closely followed by a couple Tevinter soldiers. Soldiers who, he noted, were sensibly wearing leather or chain mail.

Despite the fact that he didn't like it, the armor combined with his height allowed him to cut a very imposing figure. To the Tevinter pursuers, they were no longer chasing an old woman wearing rags, recklessly rushing down a hill with the firelight guiding them. Instead, they now found themselves barreling toward a berserking Qunari warrior, flames reflecting menacingly off the shining armor.

"If they were smart, they would stop." Tainsley bit off his words through gritted teeth.

But they continued.

"Sten, noms daar vat!" Lessef continued running at full speed to Tainsley without showing any sign of stopping.

"Oh, please. Not again," he plaintively whispered. Inside of his helmet, unseen by the soldiers on the beach, Tainsley felt his lips curl down into a pained expression as he held the battle-ax and braced himself.

Lessef beamed, the wind blowing her hair back, her ragged robe streaming behind her, looking like some feral child. Tainsley noted that she had removed her shoes at some point, leaving her bony, bare feet exposed. It would take him hours to clean them later. But he could only think on this briefly because he knew that look in her eyes. Without slowing, she lifted her right foot and placed it on Tainsley's upper left thigh, using it as a launching point to thrust herself high into the air above his head. The soldiers slowed and then stopped in their tracks as they watched the old woman tumble straight up, roll into a ball of limbs and ragged robes, tassels and ribbons flailing. She kicked out at the peak of her flight, turning to face the soldiers and then gracefully landing, standing lightly upon Tainsley's shoulder plates.

Tainsley could almost feel her smugness radiating.

He lifted the hefty ax from the ground and held it to the side in one hand, then tilted his head, as though listening for further orders from Lessef.

The tiny woman bellowed as loud as she could, *"Nehraa Antaam!"*

"Nehraa Antaam!" Tainsley responded in kind, and moved into a battle stance.

He needn't have bothered. The soldiers had already started to retreat. They never even tried to look behind them for fear that the monstrous Qunari beast was still chasing them.

Lessef giggled, and Tainsley felt her weight shift slightly above him as she knelt down. She gingerly removed the helmet and kissed him on the forehead. “My dear Tainsley, is everything ready?”

Stifling any indignation, Tainsley replied, “Yes, Mistress Lessef. The staging at the beach combined with the spectacle you caused here should leave little doubt that the deaths in the camp are the result of an Antaam raiding party. It is unlikely that the Crows will see any kind of retribution. If I might ask, what was it you were yelling?”

“Oh, that,” Lessef said, still giggling, “I’m pretty sure I said something about how the sweet bread was burning. I was thinking about cookies.”

Tainsley breathed a sigh of relief as Lessef tossed the hideous helmet to the side and then sat down on his shoulders. “Onward, to cookies!” She kicked her heels against Tainsley’s chest plate as though he were some kind of mount, and then she rested her head atop his. “Ooh, and your hair is so soft today.” He felt her nestle in a bit, using his hair as a pillow of sorts, tied with a soft kerchief. Yawning as she got comfortable, she murmured, “Tainsley, do you think you could . . . ?” Her words trailed off, and he heard the unmistakable sound of her snore.

“Yes, Mistress Lessef,” Tainsley acknowledged, and made his way back to the boat. He began to hum as she rested. It was a song he had been taught back when his family would visit his cousins, and they would be sent out to gather water from the stream. Thanks to his mistress, his uncle’s clan would at least have their halla statue back.

EIGHT LITTLE TALONS

COURTNEY WOODS

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

First Talon. . . . . Caterina Dellamorte

Second Talon. . . . . Dante Balazar

Third Talon. . . . . Lera Valisti

Fourth Talon. . . . . Emil Kortez

Fifth Talon. . . . . Viago De Riva

Sixth Talon. . . . . Bolivar Nero

Seventh Talon. . . . . Andarateia Cantori

Eighth Talon. . . . . Giuli Arainai

Viago De Riva was brought to by the frantic rocking of his carriage against Seleny's country roads. Blinking against the light, he surveyed his surroundings with a frown. Outside, rolling hills and olive groves passed by blissfully unaware of his discomfort. Viago hated carriages—no amount of plush seating could make up for the inevitable ache of being knocked around like weighted dice. But decorum insisted, and he would not be outclassed by his fellow Talons.

Rarely did the leaders of the Antivan Crows meet in one location. As the most illustrious assassin guild in Thedas, it created too tempting a target for their many enemies. *Eight birds with one stone*, Viago had warned—but the Qunari left them no choice. The invasion of the Tevinter Imperium had the southern nations on edge. Without an army, Antiva's only line of defense was the Crows. Should the Qunari decide to attack, the assassins must present a united front.

To that end, First Talon Caterina Dellamorte insisted her colleagues put aside their differences and attend a summit to concoct a plan of action. Her instructions had been clear: each Talon would come alone. No bodyguards. No servants. A skeleton staff would see to their meals and needs. In theory, these rules would ensure the guests' safety. Viago had his doubts.

Arching his back, he winced as each vertebra cracked with a satisfying *pop*. He gave the carriage door two sharp taps. "How much longer?"

"Approaching the docks now, signore," the coachman replied, then called for the horses to slow. The carriage gave one last uncomfortable sway as it rounded a corner, revealing a sparkling expanse of blue. Lago di Novo. The lake's mild climate and breathtaking views had made it a popular retreat for Antiva's wealthy since the Exalted Age. Every house was permitted to take contracts in this region, marking it neutral territory. Even ground.

The summit would be held in a villa on an island at the center of the lake called the Verdant Isle. Black lacquered gondolas dotted the lake's surface like a trail of ants—the other Talons and their luggage. Viago grimaced. He was trading one impractical cage for another.

As the carriage came to a halt, the footman jumped from his perch and rushed to the door.

"Signore." The young man bowed his head and presented Viago his walking stick.

While the rest of Viago's ensemble was a restrained suit of darkened samite, the walking stick was hand-carved in Antiva City. The shaft was ebony stained sylvan, and two silver fang-baring adders intertwined to meet at the handle, where they curled around a jade crow's egg.

Viago's long, lean legs tingled with relief as he stepped out of the carriage. The dock was a short walk downhill and he was thankful for the chance to let his blood flow properly before being cramped inside a gondola. Behind him, the footmen followed with his single trunk of belongings.

A tent had been set up on the wharf. A man in black and purple livery waited with a silver tray of fizzante and an iced towel to wipe away the grime of travel. Viago refused both without a second glance.

"I see I'm not the first to arrive," he said, gesturing toward the outgoing gondolas.

The servant opened his mouth to reply but was interrupted by a decidedly feminine voice within the tent. "Not even close."

The tent's entrance flap snapped open, unveiling an elven woman dressed in a crimson riding habit. Where Viago was made up of sharp lines and angles, Andarateia Cantori was all curves. Her eyes twinkled as if they shared a secret.

Teia.

"I can't believe I beat you, Vi. You're usually so . . ." She paused to place a well-manicured finger against his chest. "Punctual."

Viago stiffened under her touch but otherwise kept his face blank. Teia knew she was beautiful. She used it as a weapon; he knew better than to think he was special. They had run numerous contracts together —most recently in Qunari-occupied Ventus, a coastal city in Tevinter, where they'd seen the dangers of the Qun firsthand. She's an ally. Nothing more, he told himself. Not for the first time.

Up close, Viago noticed Teia's bronze skin was tinted pink from the sun and her dark, unbound hair fell in wild curls across her small frame.

"You didn't take a carriage."

"My luggage did. But I couldn't resist the opportunity for a country jaunt." She nodded toward the thoroughbred Taslin strider grazing on the top of the hill. "Andoral so rarely gets a chance to let loose in Rialto."

"You named your horse after an archdemon?"

"Don't worry, Vi. I won't let him nip you."

Behind them, the servant cleared his throat. “Excuse me, Master De Riva, but I’m afraid the majority of our flotilla is preoccupied with Mistress Cantori’s personal effects.”

Viago whirled on Teia. She didn’t bother hiding a sheepish grin.

“All of those boats are carrying your luggage? How many clothes did you bring?”

“When’s the last time we were all together? I had to dress appropriately.”

“By bringing your entire wardrobe?”

Teia gasped in mock offense. “Hardly!”

The servant once again cleared his throat. “There is one vessel remaining, if the two of you would be willing—”

“Absolutely not,” Viago interrupted.

Teia rolled her eyes. “Come now, Vi. What’s a gondola ride between friends?”

“Gossip.”

“Oh, the *horror*.”

Viago glanced at the servant, then gently took Teia by the elbow and led her to the far end of the dock, where he was sure they were out of earshot.

“We are not on holiday,” he hissed. “The other Talons will be judging our every move.”

“Exactly,” Teia replied. “You and I know what the Qunari are capable of. If the others believe House Cantori and De Riva are united . . .”

Viago filled in the blanks. “It will be easier to sway them into an alliance.”

“I knew you’d catch on.” Then she added with a wink, “Eventually.”

Viago felt his resolve crumble. “Fine.”

Clapping her hands together, Teia called for the servant to ready *their* gondola.

Half an hour later, they approached the Verdant Isle. The villa was located on the other side of the island. Viago noted it could not be seen from the main road and was just far enough that even a seasoned swimmer would have difficulty reaching its shore. Beneath the wall of cypress was a sheer cliff face, where an eddy whirled between a collection of jagged boulders.

“You arrived at the perfect time,” their gondolier announced. “During spring, it is too dangerous to travel by gondola.”

Viago sunk deeper in his seat. The man had not stopped chattering since they set sail. No doubt to impress a certain elf, who was currently admiring the way the gondolier's muscles rippled beneath his shirt with each stroke of the oar.

"Surely a man of your talents isn't afraid of a little rain," Teia practically purred.

The gondolier barked out a laugh. "You flatter me, Mistress Cantori. But I know my limits."

"Shame." Teia shrugged, her interest lost.

The gondolier stammered to regain her attention, but Viago tuned him out. The villa was finally in sight. Nestled at the base of the island, the main estate's white walls stood in stark contrast to its lush surroundings. Meticulously pruned hedges lined a front garden—the only gap was a grand iron gate flanked by two marble basilisks.

"Not exactly welcoming, are they?" Teia whispered, her breath warm against his ear.

Viago's grip tightened on the head of his walking stick.

"They say the villa's haunted," the gondolier chimed in.

"Of course they do," Viago muttered. "No doubt the spirit of Queen Madrigal stalks its halls."

"You've heard the story, signore?"

"Every grand estate in Antiva claims similar. Spare us the details and stick to what you're good at: *manual labor*."

The man looked like he might protest, then thought better of it. Something in Viago's eyes reminded him he was speaking to two of the most celebrated assassins in Thedas.

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Teia sighed as she watched the gondolier float away with his tail between his legs. "Was that necessary?"

"Yes," Viago said plainly and offered his arm.

Beneath the smooth samite, he felt like a sinewy ball of tension. Teia suspected contact of any kind made Viago uncomfortable. It would explain why he swathed himself in indigo from chin to toe and refused to remove his gloves during dinner.

Especially during dinner.

A master poisoner, Viago was all too aware that a single sip of wine could be his last. When they were in Ventus, he carried around a myriad of flasks containing antidotes and powders that could check for potential toxins. He refused to eat, drink, or touch anything without testing it first. He claimed it a necessary precaution. Teia thought that was a polite term for paranoia.

The two walked in comfortable silence past the vulgar basilisks. Unlike their marble guards, the gardens and the villa itself were tastefully appointed. The estate belonged to the Crown and, if the rumors were true, was where the king kept his mistresses. Since he allowed the Crows use of the villa for the summit, Teia assumed His Majesty was between lovers at the moment.

Glancing sideways, she wondered if Viago's mother had stayed here. Perhaps he had spent his boyhood summers playing in this garden before joining the Crows. Teia knew better than to ask.

Past the garden, Teia spotted her trunks stacked high next to the villa's main entrance. Two winded servants, overseen by a petite but formidable elderly woman, were moving them inside.

Well into her seventies, Caterina Dellamorte wore her silver-white hair swept up into a bun to divert attention to the impressive collection of rubies hanging from her ears and neck. Catching sight of Teia and Viago, she pointed her cane accusingly in their direction. "*You*. You're responsible for this!"

Teia felt Viago flinch beside her and she pursed her lips to keep from giggling. One of the many reasons Teia loved and respected Caterina was her ability to make grown men—professional killers, at that—feel like children fresh from the nursery. *To be fair to Vi*, Teia conceded, *Caterina's cane is legendary*. They had both witnessed the First Talon beat more than one unlucky fool to death with it.

"Nonna!" Teia exclaimed and bent over to place a kiss on the disgruntled woman's cheek.

"Don't 'Nonna' me, Andarateia Cantori," Caterina snapped, although the heat in her voice had lowered to a simmer. "Not even my actual grandchildren call me that."

"Well, considering *who* your grandchildren are," Teia responded, "I'm not surprised."

"How is Master Lucanis?" Viago asked.

Caterina squinted as if she only just realized he was there. “In high demand.” She returned her attention to Teia. “Five days. I said the summit would last five days—*at most*. And you bring this!”

Teia waved a dismissive hand. “Once you see my gown at tonight’s dinner, you’ll understand.”

“I don’t believe I wish to see a gown that can fill more than one trunk.”

“Don’t be silly, Nonna. It fits in a single trunk. That’s why I brought one for each evening.”

Caterina groaned, but Teia could tell she had won the older woman over. She was about to describe the gown in detail when two figures—one all too familiar—appeared in the doorway.

Dante Balazar was the very picture of what Antivan society deemed ideal—broad shoulders, pearly white teeth, chestnut tousled hair . . . only the bloodshot eyes shattered the illusion. “Teia, I should’ve known you’re the cause of all this commotion.”

Teia wasn’t sure what irked her more—that she still found Dante infuriatingly handsome or that, upon the other man’s arrival, Viago had unlaced his arm from hers.

“Lovely as ever,” Dante murmured, coming to place a kiss on Teia’s now free hand. She tried not to frown at the tremor she felt in his fingers.

Next to Dante stood Lera Valisti. Teia only knew Lera in passing, but there was something reptilian about her. She noted they both wore fencing outfits and, while Dante had a healthy sweat on his brow, not a blond hair on Lera’s head was out of place. Despite being a good twenty years older, she had thrashed Dante handily.

“Already fighting among ourselves, I see,” she said, nodding toward Lera.

“A little healthy recreation. Nothing more.” The older woman’s smooth and controlled tone set Teia on edge. Everything about Lera was too poised, too polished.

Dante flashed a bashful grin. “Don’t worry—the stabbing won’t start until after dinner.”

Caterina’s cane hit the limestone with a loud *thump*. Dante winced and bowed his head. While all Talons were peers, the same could not be said about their resources and influence. Dante would be wise to remain on Caterina’s good side.

"A poor jest," he conceded.

"Very poor," Caterina scolded. "We are here to discuss the Qunari and the security of this nation."

"So you've reminded us," Lera interjected. "Several times."

Using her cane, Caterina rose to meet Lera's height. "And I will continue to do so. Until it sticks."

The two stood off against each other for a charged moment until, finally, Lera relented, murmuring an apology.

Caterina relaxed and directed her attention to Teia and Viago. "Your rooms have been prepared. I suggest you rest before dinner. We've a long night ahead."

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With his clothes and possessions properly unpacked, Viago dismissed his assigned valet—but not before asking what was on the evening's menu.

Despite the limited staff, the plan was to serve ten courses. As always, Viago had with him his leather case of poisons and antidotes for toxins typically hidden in ingredients such as olives, truffles, pasta, lamb, cheese, cream, and alcohol. But he had not expected eggplant and needed to mix up something that could combat fleshrot, a choking powder easily absorbed by nightshades.

On top of that, he still had to take his daily dose of diluted Adder's Kiss to continue developing an immunity to that more common but no less lethal poison. Viago's stomach churned in anticipation and he reminded himself that nausea was not nearly as uncomfortable as asphyxiation.

The entire process took an hour, which left little time to dress for dinner, but Viago welcomed the distraction from thinking about who might've stayed in this room before him. He had just wrapped a silk cravat around his neck when there was a knock at the door. Teia greeted him on the other side.

"They put us next to each other," she said, slipping under his arm.

"Please. Come in," he gibed and shut the door. Turning around, Viago tried not to watch the sway of Teia's hips beneath her gown . . . and failed spectacularly.

Teia's back was bare except for a tattoo marking her as a member of House Cantori and two thin straps that somehow held together a

cascade of gold satin. With each small step forward, the dress swished this way and that, revealing a hint of leg—and the flash of a dagger strapped to her thigh.

"I heard you tinkering away in here," Teia said, breaking his reverie. She sat on his desk, smiling ear to ear. A vial of poison twirled between her fingers. "You and your concoctions."

Viago swallowed. The front of the dress was even more devastating. The delicate bodice was form-fitting, but not so tight it prohibited movement.

Irritation—and something else—ran through him.

"Off," he snapped, motioning her down from the desk. *His* desk.

Teia pouted but acquiesced.

Taking a deep breath, Viago focused on tying his cravat—an ordinarily simple task except now Teia was running her hands across every surface in his room, and his fingers kept slipping on the final knot.

"It would help if you removed the gloves," Teia remarked. "Surely your own cravats haven't been tampered with."

"The valet touched them," Viago grumbled. It was a weak defense, but a skilled poisoner knew that anything—even skin—could be laced with something deadly.

"How rude," Teia teased, coming up behind him.

His chest tightened. *Why are you here?* he wanted to ask.

It was a fair question. And yet, Viago knew if he brought attention to her impropriety, whatever this was between them would snap like a lute string midsong. And he wasn't ready for the dance to end.

So he fumbled with his cravat a *fourth* time.

Teia cursed under her breath. "You're ruining it." She pushed on Viago's back, urging him to turn around.

Only inches apart, Viago looked everywhere but Teia's face—the ceiling, his walking stick, the creepy fennec statues someone had placed around the room. Then, after second-guessing himself, he glanced down to find the damned woman laughing at him.

Viago's hands shot up to the crumpled cravat. "I don't need—"

"Hush." Teia batted him away, her nimble fingers already smoothing out the wrinkles he had created. "This is why you have a reputation."

Viago blanched. At twenty-eight, Teia was the youngest Talon in history. Gossip and a string of admirers followed her wherever she went. Compared to her, he was practically a recluse.

"*I* have a reputation?"

"As a curmudgeon, yes." Her full lips upturned slightly.

"Well, that's better than *your* reputation."

"Oh?" Teia blinked innocently up at him. "Care to elaborate?"

"Not particularly."

Their eyes met. Restless energy charged through Viago's veins that both dared him to move and held him in place.

"Dante looked well, if not a little peaked," he offered lamely.

Without warning, the cravat tightened against his Adam's apple, causing Viago to sputter.

"All finished." Teia gave the knot a small pat of approval, then sashayed back toward the desk, where her attention was once again captured by his collection of vials.

"Speaking of Dante . . . do you keep lyrium in here?" she asked, her tone turning serious.

Viago shook his head. "I've no use for it. Why?"

"Nothing," Teia whispered. "If you had, I would've suggested locking your door."

Before Viago could satisfy his curiosity, the dinner bell rang.

***

"Let the Vints and the ox-men kill each other," said Bolivar Nero, taking another sip of wine. "It's nothing to do with us."

"The Qunari are not ox-men," Teia corrected, narrowing her eyes. "They're a civilization built on discipline."

Bolivar shrugged. "They've got horns and blunder about, blindly following orders. Sounds like ox-men to me."

"Semantics aside," Viago interjected. "If they wipe each other out, that's a tidy sum of potential marks we aren't getting paid for."

Teia bit back a groan. *It all comes back to the bottom line.*

"The Qunari will not be satisfied with the Imperium," Emil Kortez said with certainty. "They have invaded Antiva before."

"More than two hundred years ago," Dante muttered.

"In Brynnlaw, there are still buildings defaced by gaatlock powder. It is a common sight in the north."

"Don't make this a competition between north and south."

Caterina's cane thumped and silence swept over the table. "Enough. Nothing spoils a meal like business."

"What meal?" Bolivar grumbled.

Seven of the eight Talons had gathered for dinner. Only Lera was absent. Caterina had insisted they hold the first course until her arrival, but patience was not a virtue shared among Crows.

Well, at least not Bolivar, Teia thought as she watched the older elf fidget. With his long shock of white hair and fine suit trimmed in bear fur, Bolivar had all the trappings of a Talon, but none of the substance. His family had made their fortune as pearl divers and were once the wealthiest elves in Antiva. House Nero no longer held that title, but Bolivar spent coin as if Rialto Bay had an infinite supply of pearls to support his lavish lifestyle.

"Relax, Bolivar. We're all in this together." Emil Kortez's words were polite, casual, but with the added gravitas that came from the older man's experience and reputation. While he did not command a large house, as a merchant prince, his wealth exceeded Teia and Viago's combined. Only a few years younger than Caterina, Emil knew how to weather the storm of change—and how to turn a profit.

Bolivar's jaw twitched, but he held his tongue, filling his mouth with wine rather than words. The drinks were meant to mollify the guests, but Teia feared they only picked at the scabbing tension in the room. Despite the warm glow of candlelight, the atmosphere was as cold and rigid as the limestone table they *should* be eating on.

The double doors to the dining room opened like a sigh of relief that came too soon when a servant—not Lera—entered. She handed a note to Caterina.

"Lera sends her apologies and asks we begin without her," Caterina announced.

"That's it?" Bolivar badgered, his nostrils flaring.

"I'm sure she has a good reason," Dante replied.

Teia noticed his hands were shaking. This afternoon it had been a slight tremor; now he would have trouble picking up a fork. He caught her staring and hid them under the table.

"You would know," Giuli Arainai whispered, naked resentment in her tone. It was the first time she had spoken that evening.

"Oh, stay silent if you're not going to say anything useful," Caterina snapped and rang for dinner to be served.

The antipasti and primi courses did not improve conversation. Any attempt at pleasantry was met with grunts of disinterest or no acknowledgment at all. The only consistent noise was the relentless clashing of Dante's knife against his plate as he tried to cut his food. It was an unspoken but well-known secret that Dante was addicted to lyrium—a consequence from his youth when he took a contract that required him to go undercover as a templar. Everyone was doing their best to pointedly ignore his quavering hands and the sheen of sweat on his brow, but Teia knew his struggle more intimately.

He's trying to quit again.

Dante had tried to stave off lyrium before, but it made him erratic. A master assassin not in control of his faculties was a dangerous liability. Considering the discussion ahead, Teia feared he chose a terrible time to go cold turkey.

Suddenly, Giuli pushed back from the table. "I'm going to check on Lera."

Dante dropped his fork with a loud clang that stopped Giuli before she reached the door. "I'll do it."

"No," Caterina said, not looking up from her gnocchi. "You're both acting strange. Viago will go."

Viago arched a brow. "Me?"

"Take Andarateia with you."

"As you wish, Nonna."

Dante fell back, but Giuli stood her ground. "I'm perfectly capable—"

Caterina cut her off. "You know how I feel about repeating myself."

Teia thought Giuli might fight back, but self-preservation—and Caterina's cool gaze—cut her to size.

Free from the dining room, Teia said, "Well, that was unexpected."

"Which part?" Viago asked. "It all seemed pretty standard to me."

"Giuli standing up to anyone—much less Caterina—is *not* standard."

When Teia first rose through the ranks, she hoped to find some camaraderie with her fellow elves, but Bolivar had snubbed her as an overreaching street rat and Giuli wasn't in the position to make friends. Her family had lost face when one of their assassins failed to complete a contract on the Hero of Ferelden's life. It had been a long, bloody battle back to the top and Giuli's seat was still precarious.

"If she knows what's good for her, she won't make a habit of it."

They walked in tandem up the grand marble staircase. Despite the darkness of nightfall, the villa's interior was colorful with yellow paneled walls and red carpet. Freshly cut Crystal Grace spilled from vases on the stone newels. Teia had a garden full of the bell-shaped flowers in Rialto. Normally, she found them calming, but their presence wasn't enough to sooth the itchy feeling in the back of her mind.

She reached for Viago's arm. "Something's wrong," she whispered as they turned down the guest wing. He nodded in agreement.

The villa felt so *empty*. Teia assumed the limited staff were working in the kitchen, but one still expected to hear the odd footstep or muffled exchange.

When they reached Lera's door, Viago hesitated. "Perhaps it would be better if you—"

"Unh-uh." Teia wagged her finger. "This is your task. I'm just the tagalong."

Viago rolled his shoulders, as if working up the nerve to knock on the door.

"Don't tell me this is the first time you've visited a woman's bedchamber unannounced," Teia teased, loving the way his cheeks flushed at the words *woman* and *bedchamber*.

He leaned closer to her. "I'm not the green boy you think I am."

This was the tit for tat she'd hoped for in his room. "Then prove it."

Without breaking her gaze, Viago gave the door three sturdy knocks.

No answer.

"Perhaps she's taken ill?" Teia offered, though she doubted it. Four hours ago, Lera had been in peak health.

Viago tried again with the same result. He pushed his ear against the polished mahogany.

"Anything?"

He shook his head and tried the doorknob. It was locked.

"Lera," Teia called.

Nothing.

"Are you armed?" Viago asked.

Teia lifted her dress just enough to reveal the blade strapped to her thigh. "Always."

After gratifying her leg with a quick appreciative glance, Viago pulled on the handle of his walking stick to reveal a hidden chamber containing six vials of Maker knows what. He selected one, then warned Teia to

stand back and poured the vial's contents onto the doorknob. The substance immediately began eating away at the metal and the lock behind it.

"A highly potent mixture of deepstalker spit and aqua regia," Viago explained, snapping the handle of his walking stick back into place.

"That you just happen to keep handy. At a dinner party. Among colleagues," Teia deadpanned.

"You have your blades. I have my—"

"Vials of death."

What was left of the doorknob fell to the floor with a *clang*. The door swung ajar.

"Lera. We're coming in," Viago announced. Teia readied her dagger as he opened the door the rest of the way.

A pair of dead, glossy eyes watched them enter. Lera Valisti, Third Talon of the Antivan Crows, laid sprawled on the bed, four steel blades protruding from her chest.

The itch at the back of Teia's mind flared as she remembered Viago and the gondolier's earlier conversation.

The spirit of Queen Madrigal stalks its halls.

Centuries ago, the Queen of Antiva had been found after a hunting party with four steel blades in her chest. It was one of the most infamous assassinations in Crow history.

And now, a Talon had been killed in the same fashion.

Teia lowered her weapon and sighed. "Well, shit."

***

Well, shit is right, Viago thought as he examined Lera's body. She was lying face-up with her arms spread outward, the blades in her chest like needles in a pincushion.

"The blood's begun to clot." He tried lifting Lera's right arm, but the muscles, rigid from rigor mortis, resisted. "She's been dead for hours."

"Then who sent the note?" Teia asked, leaning over his shoulder.

"We should question the servant. Do you have a hairpin?"

Teia retrieved one of the many pins keeping her typically unruly hair coiffed. Viago bent over to get a closer look at Lera's hands.

"Vi, I love a secret, but won't it look suspicious if we don't inform the others? Like now. Or, at the very latest, soon?"

"There's something here. I need parchment."

Teia checked the desk for stationery. Grabbing a sheet, she returned to his side. "Vi," she urged. "You know I hate being the responsible one."

"If we go downstairs with nothing, they'll start pointing fingers. Let's narrow the field." Viago used the hairpin to gently scrape under Lera's nails. A blue substance fell onto the stationery.

Lyrium.

Teia's breath hitched. "Well, that's peculiar," she said a little too casually.

"Peculiar?" Viago needled. "That's all you have to say?"

"I know you're thinking Dante, but it couldn't possibly be him."

"Oh? Then why ask if I had lyrium? And warn me to lock it away?" That stopped her, if only for a second. "A precaution. No need to tempt a starving man with low-hanging fruit. You heard Dante at dinner. All that clashing and clanging. He's obviously in withdrawal."

As a rule, Viago tried to ignore Dante Balazar. To say he found his fellow assassin grating was an understatement. Dante was brawny, where Viago was lean. He was an excellent swordsman, where Viago preferred poison. He had been Teia's lover, where Viago . . . well, it was better to ignore Dante. Still, even he had to admit the man had not looked himself tonight.

"His complexion was rather sallow."

"An addict like Dante—he knows better than to handle lyrium directly. Still . . ." Teia bit her lip and knelt to check Lera's arms. "No cuts on her arms or palms. I took Lera for a fighter."

"From the amount of blood, I'd say the attacker hit an artery. The first blow was the killing one."

"But to catch Lera off guard, she must've known them. She and Dante did look rather cozy when we arrived."

Teia's brows knitted together. Viago knew she wanted reassurance of her former lover's innocence, but she was fishing in the wrong pond. He thought back to their arrival at the villa. Lera and Dante had claimed to be sparring, but perhaps something more had been afoot? Lera certainly hadn't looked happy when Dante kissed Teia's hand.

To be fair, neither were you, a part of him admitted.

"The real question is, why the theatrics?" He took another look at the daggers. "These blades are perfect replicas of the ones that killed Queen Madrigal."

"Most likely not a crime of passion, then. I doubt the guest rooms came equipped with historical ready-to-use daggers for a flashy murder." Teia thought for a moment. "To kill Lera in this way . . . it's a statement."

They both stood and soaked in the scene. The sight of Lera caked in her own blood unnerved Viago to his core. It wasn't the violence or the death itself—he was used to that. The Antivan Crows were the bogeymen of Thedas. Kings, queens, generals—no one was beyond their grasp. But Talons were supposed to be untouchable.

That's the message, Viago realized. "None of us are safe."

***

As Viago anticipated, the finger-pointing began not five seconds after he and Teia delivered the news of Lera's death. The other Talons insisted upon inspecting the scene of the crime for themselves. Despite each of them knowing a thing or two about murder, no further clues were found, and the investigation devolved into a sniping round. Caterina, of course, was a true Crow in crisis—overly casual as to not show any sign of weakness. Before leaving to question the servants, she ordered the guests back to the dining room . . . where the sniping continued.

"You did this," Giuli hissed at Dante.

"You're the one who wanted to check on her," he said, struggling to his feet. "Afraid you didn't finish the job?"

"I say, are you all right?" Bolivar sneered.

"No, he's not," Teia whispered.

Viago glanced over his shoulder. Teia's large, halla-gold eyes flashed with anger and her jaw muscles pulsed. He'd always assumed her dalliance with Dante had been a fling. The realization that it was something deeper felt worse than his daily dose of Adder's Kiss.

Dante shot her a pleading look. "Teia. Please—"

"I saw you and Lera arguing in the garden," Giuli interrupted. "You were always arguing."

Dante clenched his fists. "And you're always skulking about!"

"Perhaps," Emil interjected, "we should wait until Caterina returns before we start throwing around accusations."

"Bit late for that." As if on cue, Caterina appeared in the doorway.

"What have you learned?" Viago asked, eager to make headway rather than stir up more drama.

Caterina lowered herself into the silk-upholstered chair at the head of the table. "The girl claims the note was already in front of the door when she arrived."

"Then, she never actually spoke to Lera?"

"If we can believe her."

"I, for one, don't," Bolivar spat. "How *thoroughly* did you question her?"

"I didn't torture her, if that's what you're asking."

"Why not?" Giuli rasped. "A Talon is dead. Don't you care?"

Caterina rubbed her temples. For a moment, her cool mask slipped, and she truly looked her age. "Of course, I care. I went through a great deal of trouble and expense to arrange this meeting. And now, the entire night has been ruined. We can hardly discuss the Qunari with a dead woman upstairs. A coincidence? I think not."

Interesting theory, Viago mused. He had jumped to the conclusion a fellow Talon was responsible, but the Qunari had the most to gain from interfering with the summit.

"Who are you thinking? Ben-Hassrath spies?" Dante asked.

Caterina nodded gravely. "A definite possibility."

"Except the intelligence Teia and I gathered in Ventus confirms the Ben-Hassrath broke with the Antaam when they invaded Tevinter. The Qunari are fractured."

Bolivar snorted. "An ox-man's an ox-man."

"And every Antivan's a Crow?" Teia snapped.

Viago shook his head. It would be better if the Qunari were responsible, but the pieces didn't fit. "It also doesn't explain the lack of defensive wounds. Lera knew her killer."

"Which brings us back to Dante," Giuli said, smirking.

"I'm not the only one she knew at this table."

"Yes, but you're the only one with a history of lyrium addiction. And what was under Lera's nails?"

Dante charged at Giuli, but before he could reach her, Caterina slammed her cane against the marble floor. The intensity of the sound dropped Dante like a stone. He collapsed, gripping his head with both hands.

Caterina waited for Dante to collect himself, then smoothed her skirts. "While the Qunari may be fractured, the Antaam are not without assassins. I still believe this is an outside threat. I will speak with the servants about fortifying the villa against future attacks and we will search the island in the morning. With luck, we'll find a Qunari intruder —deal with them—then hold the summit in the afternoon."

"And if the Qunari are not responsible?" Viago asked, scowling.

"We will deal with them and hold the summit in the afternoon," she repeated, her voice hard.

"This is crazy," Bolivar sputtered. "You can't expect us to stay here."

Caterina stared him down. "The Qunari threat did not die with Lera."

"Yes, but—"

Emil placed a hand on the quivering elf's shoulder and smiled a smile worth a thousand sovereigns. "Bolivar. Are you questioning the First Talon?"

He shrank under Emil's touch. "O-of course not."

"Then I suggest we return to our rooms. And see to our own personal fortifications."

***

The next morning, Teia woke with a start. Sensing movement next to her bed, she grabbed the dagger beneath her pillow and held it against the throat of her uninvited guest.

"*This* is why I don't visit a woman's bedchamber unannounced," a familiar voice drawled.

Teia blinked the sleep from her eyes. "Vi?"

"You were supposed to lock your door."

"But what if I had a clandestine visitor?" she asked, grinning.

Viago's jaw jutted forward. "Get dressed. It's been an eventful morning."

Teia swung her legs out from under the covers. Even in the dark, she could see Viago's face turn white as he got an eyeful of her sleeping ensemble.

"I'm wearing a chemise."

"A *thin* chemise. Please, just—" He fumbled about until he found her dressing gown, then held it out like a lifeline. "Put this on."

Knotting the sash around her waist, she asked, "Has there been another murder?"

"If only it were one."

They started downstairs in the kitchen. A wooden table dressed in a simple but finely made lace cloth was set up next to the oven. On it was a half-eaten, sugar-drizzled lemon cake, a pot of coffee, and a vase of wildflowers. It would've been a cozy sight, if not for the eight corpses lying face-first in their dessert plates.

"Caterina found them this morning when no one delivered her breakfast tray," Viago said. "We'll have to cook our own meals from now on."

Teia approached the table. There was something eerily familiar about the scene, but she couldn't quite place why. She bent over one of the servants, who had helped her dress the evening before, and tucked a lock of red hair behind her ear. The girl's once smooth, youthful skin was blotchy with burst blood vessels and there was pink, bloody foam around her chapped lips.

"They were poisoned with Maferath's Embrace," Viago explained. "A particular nasty toxin that increases the victim's blood pressure, causing veins and, ultimately, organs to rupture. Expensive, too."

"Why target the servants?" Teia asked through shallow breaths, trying to keep her anger—and stomach—in check.

Viago shrugged. "Fewer eyes. With the staff dead, the killer has free rein of the house. Assuming it is Lera's murderer."

"You're not so sure?"

"Oh, *I'm* sure. The others aren't convinced. Poison and stabbing aren't the same modus operandi, but both crimes re-create assassinations from Crow history."

Suddenly, it hit Teia why the scene was so familiar. In the Towers Age, the Crows were hired to eliminate the highest members of the Templar Order in retribution for covering up the slaughter of mages during the Right of Annulment. Knowing the templars to be skilled warriors, the assassins decided the quickest and cleanest way to deal with the knight-captains and their commander was through poison. They infiltrated the Circle and spiked the evening's lemon cake, earning the murder the moniker "Just Desserts."

"It's not the same," Teia whispered. "The only crime these poor souls committed was to serve us."

"You're getting bogged down by the details. Lera wasn't a queen. These 'poor souls,' as you put it, weren't templars. The *who* is immaterial, it's the *what* that matters."

Teia frowned. "The *who* matters. There are rules. Unless guilty, we don't kill the help. And cake should be sacred," she added glumly.

Viago straightened his gloves. "No, *you* don't kill the help. Do you really think Bolivar, Emil, or even your *precious* Dante would think twice about slitting the throat of a witness—innocent or not?"

Teia tilted her head. "My precious Dante?"

Viago ignored the question. "The point is—it's the same killer."

She considered his words. "Two historical murders in a row would be too much of a coincidence."

Viago drew breath against his teeth. "Three."

Teia paled. "How late did I sleep in?"

"Follow me."

"No," she said, crossing her arms. "Not until we boil some water."

Viago raised a brow. "Eight people were poisoned in this room."

"Then run your little tests to make sure it's safe, but I refuse to look at another dead body until I've had my coffee."

***

As they left the kitchen, Teia felt like she was trapped in some terrible guessing game. Viago had brewed the coffee in silence and she couldn't bring herself to ask which of the other Talons were dead. She ran through the possibilities and concluded that, at the very least, Caterina was safe. Even Viago couldn't maintain such a calm façade if she had been murdered.

That left Bolivar, Emil, Giuli, and . . . *Dante*. Teia clenched her fists. Their relationship was complicated, but she didn't want him dead. There had been days when the lyrium relaxed its thorny grasp, and she could imagine the man he would've been if he hadn't taken that contract.

That's the thing they don't tell you, Teia thought. The most dangerous jobs aren't the ones you don't come back from—they're the ones that stay with you.

Viago must have sensed her anxiety because he said, voluntarily, that Dante and Emil were searching the island. "Caterina still believes there's a Qunari agent hiding somewhere."

Teia stared at the back of his head in wonder. Viago and words of comfort were like oil and water.

When she didn't respond, Viago stopped. "Teia?"

They were halfway up the stairs. A ray of sunshine peeked through the velvet curtains and surrounded Viago in a soft glow that smoothed the harsh lines of his face, giving him a more relaxed look than Teia had seen before.

Teia had often imagined what it would be like to kiss Viago. She told herself it was only natural. He was handsome, in his own way, and wound up so tight that she likened him to a giant knot. He was a challenge to untie—to twist and pull and loosen until the tension gave way and he unraveled, laying bare all his secrets. But knots were a delicate business. Tug the wrong way and you could end up with a noose.

Perhaps the better strategy would be to cut straight through?

"Are you all right?" Viago's forehead creased with worry. "Was it the coffee? I tested for Maferath's Embrace, but there could've been other—"

"I'm fine," Teia said with a reassuring smile. "Just admiring your good looks."

Most people would've been thrilled by the compliment. Viago only scowled and turned tail. Teia couldn't understand it. They'd joke and tease, but whenever she tried to speak of the obvious attraction between them, he'd clam up. *Well, not this time*.

She chased after him. "What?"

"Nothing," he growled and continued stomping toward the guest wing.

"Do you not think you're attractive?"

Viago turned on her, his ears pink. "Ten people are dead."

She didn't back down. "And whoever's responsible will pay, but that has no bearing on this conversation."

"It could be me."

Covering her mouth with both hands, Teia doubled over, laughter spilling from her lips. "It's not you."

He looked as if she'd slapped him. "I'm more than capable of killing everyone here."

"Don't tell me you're offended!"

"It is offensive," Viago protested. "Professionally."

Teia leaned closer to see if he was being serious. His tight jaw and furrowed brow bore all the signs of a bruised ego. "I know it's not you

because we were together when Lera was murdered," she explained. "Remember? I tied your cravat."

The flush creeped from Viago's ears to his cheeks. "Yes, well, of course I didn't do it. It's just the principle of the matter."

"You're ridiculous."

"Come on," Viago grumbled and led her to Giuli Arainai's room.

Nodding toward the door, he said, "Scratches on the lock suggest someone picked their way inside. Not that that tells us much."

"On the contrary." Teia winked. "It means our killer didn't have an invitation. This was no late-night rendezvous."

As they crossed the threshold, the sharp tang of copper assaulted Teia's nose. Giuli sagged over her vanity, a bloody pearl necklace dangling around her open throat.

"Poor Giuli," Teia whispered as she neared the body.

"I didn't know you were friends."

"Really, Vi," Teia muttered. "You don't have to be friends with someone to feel sympathy."

"If you say so."

The laceration on Giuli's neck was deep but clean. A quick death—although far from painless.

"They cut straight through her vocal cords," Teia observed. "Just like that famous opera singer . . . what was her name?"

"Carlota Montivecchio, the Songbird," Viago replied. "A talented performer, but not a very gracious one. A rival soprano hired the Crows to *cut* Carlota's career short after the singer tried to strangle her with a pearl necklace."

Teia sat back on her heels. "You know your operatic history."

"I know Crow history," Viago corrected. "The director found Carlota after curtain call—her throat slashed and a string of pearls around her neck."

"Well, Giuli wasn't a songbird," Teia said. "She was the quiet one. Except last night. She took Lera's death particularly hard."

"Like I said, I don't think the *who* matters. These theatrics are a distraction."

A damned good one, Teia thought. "Who found her?"

"Dante. Claimed he stopped by to apologize."

Despite Viago's skeptical tone, that sounded just like Dante to Teia. *As quick to apologize as he is to anger.*

"I take it the others didn't believe him."

"Bolivar's convinced Dante killed Lera and Giuli."

"Bolivar . . ." Teia's gaze returned to the necklace. "His family's in pearls."

"I don't think that's enough to incriminate him." Then, he added with a smirk, "Unfortunately."

Tearing herself away from Giuli, Teia stood and headed toward the door—and fresh air. Viago followed, his footsteps soft and even.

"What about the servants?" she asked, as they made their way back down the hall. "Does Bolivar think Dante killed them as well?"

"No," Viago answered, his jaw clenched. "He blames me for that."

Teia quickly put two and two together. "Because they were poisoned."

Viago confirmed her suspicions with a curt nod.

"That's silly. We all use poison. You just have a weird thing for it."

"The word you're looking for is *specialty*."

"It's a bit more than that." Teia tapped the handle of Viago's walking stick. All Crows might utilize poison, but very few kept so many on their person.

"You said Caterina still thinks the Qunari are responsible. What about Emil and Dante? What did they say?"

"They're holding out hope she's correct. Speaking of which," Viago paused to retrieve a silver timepiece from his jacket pocket. "They should be back by now."

* * *

They found Caterina and Bolivar sitting on the wraparound balcony overlooking the front garden. Caterina was so still she looked at home with the marble statues guarding the villa. In stark contrast, Bolivar's short legs bounced frantically. He had already broken into the cellar for some liquid courage.

"What took you so long?" the elf demanded. His hair was frizzing at the ends and his teeth were stained gray from red wine. *Demon teeth*, Viago had called such teeth as a child. The image reminded him of his mother after his father's visits had become infrequent.

"Any word from Emil and Dante?" he asked Caterina.

"They're coming up the hill now," she replied, her voice tight. "From their faces, I expect bad news."

Viago wasn't surprised. Still, a small part of him hoped he was wrong. It would've made things easier.

Teia left Viago's side to bundle Caterina's shawl tightly around her shoulders. "Vi made coffee, Nonna. I could bring you a cup."

The old Crow snorted. "Coffee made by a master poisoner in a kitchen full of corpses? I'll pass."

Viago chuckled. Teia was always trying to make the others like him. She grew up on the streets. To her, joining the Crows was akin to finding a family. Caterina was the mother she never had. Giuli had been her jealous sister. Emil and Bolivar, the rich and drunk uncles respectively. But to Viago, these people were business partners. He didn't need to be liked—only respected and feared, a little.

A few minutes later, Emil and Dante appeared. Viago noted that, compared to last night, the coloring in Dante's face was healthier and his eyes were brighter, more alert. It could be from the exertion of searching the island, he told himself. Or, he could be taking lyrium again.

"We checked everywhere. No one's here but us," Dante said.

"And there's more bad news," Emil added. "The spare gondola docked in case of emergency . . . Smashed. There's no way off the island."

"We're trapped here?" Bolivar asked, his tone growing shrill. "Can't we signal the mainland?"

"If one of us is the killer, that would only allow them to escape," Emil pointed out.

"Better than all of us dying!"

"Antivan Crows don't run," Caterina seethed, and the other Crows stood a little straighter.

"This is what you wanted, isn't it?" Bolivar croaked, his already delicate composure unraveling at the seams. "To get us all in one place, then pick us off. You want to be the only one left! You—"

Caterina snatched the wineglass from Bolivar's hand and threw it over the balcony. The bottle on the table soon followed. "You're stupid to begin with, Bolivar, and drink only makes you stupider."

The elf's lips trembled as pride and cowardice wrestled for control.

"No more shallow accusations," Caterina said, not giving him a chance to respond. "It's clear the killer wants to divide us—pit us against each other. We must focus on the facts." She paused and glanced uneasily at Dante and Viago. "To that end, you two are to be confined to your quarters."

Indignation hit Viago like a worn whip. He opened his mouth to defend himself, but Teia was quicker on the draw. "Nonna, you can't be serious!"

"The evidence is slim, but the lyrium under Lera's nails points to Dante. And—"

"I was with Viago when Lera was killed," Teia interrupted.

Caterina's face softened. She used the tone of a mother trying to explain death to a child. "And the servants? Were you with him then?"

Teia caught Viago's eye and, through a silent question, he realized she was asking if he wanted her to lie for him. Another whiplash of emotion rolled through him. As an assassin and a king's bastard, Viago had spent his life watching his own back, never expecting help from anyone. What Teia offered now was like walking across a rickety bridge—he wanted the planks to hold, but he couldn't ignore the endless abyss below.

He shook his head.

Teia deflated. "I was not, but—"

Emil's soft voice interjected. "Not to speak on Caterina's behalf, but I believe this is a precaution—not a condemnation."

"Yes, Emil has the way of it," Caterina said, obviously relieved to have someone besides Bolivar backing her up. "Maferath's Embrace is rare and difficult to administer. When it comes to poison, Viago is the best of us. And he already admitted to having some in his possession."

Teia gaped at Viago. "Why would you do that?"

His cheeks reddened. "Hiding it would only make me look guilty."

"Apparently, you look guilty enough. What about Giuli?" Teia asked Caterina. "Nothing from her murder points to Dante or Vi."

Caterina took an apprehensive breath. "She was the loudest about Dante's guilt and her vocal cords were severed."

"That's a reach and you know it!" Dante shouted.

Considering the lack of restraint Dante had shown last night, Viago was impressed he had remained quiet for so long.

Caterina stood, her knuckles white from gripping her cane. "Yes, I do, which is why I'm locking you in your room instead of executing you on the spot."

"There were pearls around Giuli's neck," Teia challenged. "Bolivar's a pearl diver. Why not lock him up as well?"

"*I'm* not a pearl diver," Bolivar corrected. "I *employ* pearl divers."

"Do you?" Emil asked. "Because I heard you sold the business—to Dante."

A hushed silence fell upon the balcony. Pearls were synonymous with House Nero. For Bolivar to sell it . . . his accounts must be in dire straits. The elf looked stricken. He glanced over the side of the railing to stare longingly at the smashed wine bottle. "Even more proof Dante's our man," he whispered.

An annoyingly perfect blue vein pulsed at the center of Dante's forehead. "*Pezzo di merda!* You're setting me up. First with the lyrium, then with the pearls."

Viago scoffed. Bolivar didn't have the brains—or the stomach—to pull off something like this. "This isn't just about you. My head's on the chopping block as well."

"Your daddy will protect you," Dante sneered.

Viago choked his walking stick and counted ten poisons that would leave Dante's face unrecognizable.

"None of this matters," said Caterina, cutting the tension. "Unlike Maferath's Embrace, the pearls weren't the murder weapon. And, unlike lyrium, they're a common enough item to be found in a lady's room. As Emil said, this is a precaution. If we find evidence that rules you out—"

"Or someone else is murdered," Viago growled.

"*Then* you'll be set free. Until such time, you are not to leave your quarters or receive visitors. Am I clear?"

***

Viago was not in his room thirty minutes before he heard the unmistakable clawing of a lockpick at his door. He took a seat in the quilted, moss-green chair that faced the room's entrance and waited, cross-legged, for Teia to spring the bolt free.

It took less than two minutes.

"Tell me," Viago asked as Teia entered and leaned against the door, "why do you think you're the exception to every rule?"

"Because I've yet to be corrected." She sauntered up to his chair and sat on the armrest. Viago noticed she had traded the dressing gown for her usual black dueling leathers.

"You're awfully relaxed. I could've been the murderer."

"*I'm* the murderer, remember," Viago said dryly.

"We both know that's not true," Teia whispered. "Why didn't you let me help you?"

He wanted to say, *You respect Caterina. I couldn't ask you to lie to her. Not for me*. Instead, he stood to put some distance between them. "I'm out of practice."

"Well, I hope you've reconsidered. Bolivar's not changing his tune."

"If he wasn't so spineless, I'd say Dante's theory had merit. The drunken fool's certainly doing the killer's work for them," Viago growled, then hesitated. "Still . . ."

"You don't think Bolivar's entirely wrong. About Dante." It was a simple statement, but he knew Teia well enough to hear the waver in her normal bravado.

Viago paused, unsure if he was making something out of nothing. "I noticed you didn't come to his defense."

Teia glanced at the floor. "I've defended him long enough."

It was the same tone she'd used last night when she asked if he kept lyrium in his case. "There are things that don't add up—beyond the lyrium," he said.

"You mean how he didn't look half dead today?"

"That, and that there was something going on between him, Lera, and Giuli. The way they were acting . . . Is he, I mean, was he . . ." Viago cleared the embarrassment from his throat. "Was he the faithful sort?"

"The faithful sort?" Teia stalked toward him, a mischievous grin on her face.

"You know when you were . . ."

"When we were . . . ?"

Viago frowned. *She's going to make me say it*.

"You two have a history."

Teia continued her advance. "I have history with a lot of people."

"I'm well aware." The words came out harsher than he intended.

Teia's brows rose. "Does that bother you?"

It was a leading question. Viago knew he should laugh it off, but he couldn't help himself. "Only if I'm a footnote."

Teia stopped cold. Doubt curdled in Viago's stomach. He opened his mouth to backtrack, when she reached out to brush the line of his jaw. It was only a whisper of flesh against flesh, but to Viago, it might as well have been a punch to the gut. It had been so long since he had allowed someone to touch him. To get close. He was breathless.

"That's entirely up to you." Teia's hand dropped, but her phantom touch lingered on his skin. "As to your original question, yes, he was 'the faithful sort.' I thought we decided these weren't crimes of passion."

Viago shrugged. "We're Antivan. Passion comes in many forms. If the killer's been nursing a grudge, this could be the opportunity they've been waiting for."

Teia bit her bottom lip—she was nervous. "There's still too much speculation. Caterina won't budge until we have proof. And it's not like Dante's going to admit to anything."

"Not without a little push," Viago said with a smirk. He crossed the room to his desk and opened his case of poisons.

"Not another one of your concoctions, Vi," Teia groaned. "You can't have a vial for everything."

"I can certainly strive to," Viago whispered as his gloved fingers perused the glass cylinders. He settled on one that contained a rose-colored ointment and a handwritten label that read: *Pillow Talk*.

He held the vial up to Teia. "This is an influencer. It causes a warm, languid feeling in the stomach that spreads throughout the body. It makes the person believe they can say or do anything—that they're safe. Even Dante won't be able to resist. *Especially* if it's given by an old friend."

Teia side-eyed him and grabbed the vial. "Interesting name. Why didn't we use this in Ventus?"

"It turns a greenish tint in candlelight. A reaction from the varghest blood. When it's mixed with gurgut . . ." Observing Teia's wrinkled nose, he decided to keep the rest of the serum's ingredients to himself. "I couldn't risk it with the Qunari, but it's a worth a try with Dante—if you're willing."

Teia twirled the cylinder between the soft pad of her thumb and pointer finger. "How is it administered?"

"Anywhere on the skin. Hands, arms—"

"Lips?"

"Yes," Viago admitted reluctantly.

"I assume you have some sort of safety measure to keep me from falling under its effects."

"I do."

"Good. Then we can do it my way."

"Meaning?"

Teia all but batted her eyelashes at him. "Meaning an influencer can only do so much. If we want the whole truth, it'll have to be *coaxed*."

"The serum is very effective."

"So am I."

Jealousy nipped at Viago's heels. In Ventus, he'd seen how Teia "coaxed" unsuspecting marks. Even the staunchest Qunari Karasten eventually swayed to her tune. They'd lose themselves in her large eyes, the feel of her lips, and never see the knife coming for the soft spot between their ribs. Teia was a master at playing men like strings. Even now, he felt the pluck of her fingers—she wanted a reaction.

He wouldn't give it to her.

"Sit."

He'd been referring to the green chair, but Teia plopped herself on the bed. Viago bit down his frustration and selected a different vial that contained a clear ointment. Holding the glass cylinder in a tight fist, he met Teia next to the bed, making sure to keep himself at arm's-length.

"This will create a protective film," he explained. "I'll apply it first, then the serum."

Teia shook her hair from her face and shoulders. "Ready when you are."

Viago tried to keep his pulse steady as he tapped a dollop of the ointment into his gloved palm. He was going to touch her lips. *Lips that will be kissing someone else*, he reminded himself. But even that wasn't enough to stop his heart from pounding in anticipation.

After taking a deep breath through his nose, Viago dipped his thumb into the salve and stepped closer to Teia. He lightly cupped her face to give himself just enough support to rub the ointment across her bottom lip.

This close to her, the room was uncomfortably warm. He was painfully aware of the soft pressure of Teia's inner thigh against his leg, of the faint smell of coffee and cinnamon on her breath. The fullness of her lips—the way they folded and moved under his thumb—was mesmerizing.

When he finished, Teia reached up to inspect his handiwork. Viago gently caught her by the wrist.

"Wait for it to dry." His voice was thick. He could hear his heartbeat banging against each syllable.

Teia let out a breath mingled with laughter. “You’re as authoritative in the bedroom as I imagined you’d be.”

Viago inwardly congratulated himself for waiting a full ten seconds before asking, “You’ve imagined me?”

“Do you really want to know?”

Again, Viago felt like a lute string. With every challenge, Teia twisted the pegs, tuning him, until she found what she wanted. *Which is what, exactly?* he asked himself, not daring to listen to the number of answers that bubbled to the surface of his mind.

“It’s dry,” he whispered, not answering her question.

Popping the cork of Pillow Talk, Viago shook the vial downward until he could scoop a healthy amount onto his fingertips.

“Now the serum. Once applied, avoid licking your lips. Or touching them, obviously.”

Teia’s eyes sparkled. “Obviously.”

“Ready?” he asked himself more than her.

She nodded and lifted her chin to give him better access. Steeling his resolve, Viago once again leaned in.

He’d hoped the second time would be easier, but the ache in the pit of his stomach only gnawed harder. His grip on her jaw tightened slightly to steady his trembling hands. If Teia noticed, she kept her face neutral, her eyes never leaving his.

It would be so easy to kiss her—to finally discover if her mouth was as soft as he had imagined. Because, of course, he had imagined. So many times. In so many ways. And he hated himself for it. When it came to Teia, he was as weak as any other mark—a lamb to slaughter.

As if she could feel the sudden rush of shame within him, Teia brought her hands up to rest on Viago’s hips, holding him in place. His thumb stilled as he realized her breath was short. Her pupils dilated.

Before he could stop himself, Viago nuzzled his forehead against hers, his nose brushing her cheek. Teia’s hands snaked up his chest to run through his hair. She tugged him forward. He braced himself on one arm, while the other curled around the small of her back. Panting cheek to cheek, their bodies moved together in an entangled, rhythmic motion.

He was just about to wipe the serum off Teia’s lips when they heard an uneven gait outside the door.

Step, thump, step. Step, thump, step.

Both froze.

A cane. Viago groaned inwardly. *Caterina. Come to see if I'm being a good little prisoner*.

His mind raced. If Caterina found Teia inside his room, she would also be considered a suspect. Very slowly, he positioned his gloved palm over Teia's mouth. Their eyes locked in understanding. She took one quiet inhale before holding her breath.

"It's rude to lurk," Viago called.

"You'll forgive me if I'm beyond caring," Caterina snapped back, her voice muffled through the door.

"Has something happened?"

"No. All's quiet for now." She sounded weary.

Viago thought about defending himself, then decided it would be better to wait until Teia had new information from Dante. Just the thought of the other man was like a cold shower.

"If you're satisfied, I'm going back to my book."

"Yes, yes," she mumbled.

He waited until he was sure Caterina was out of earshot, then dropped his hand from Teia's mouth. They shared an awkward, shaky glance, before he rolled away and Teia got to her feet.

"I'll be off, then," she whispered.

Viago nodded, unable to meet her gaze.

Teia slunk out the door, as quiet as she came.

***

Standing outside her ex-lover's room, Teia tried to quell the violent drumming within her. Normally, she didn't need to come down from a physical encounter. Seduction—like any form of manipulation—was about control. She could enjoy herself, but Teia always made sure to hold the upper hand. Viago had shattered that control without so much as a kiss.

Pressing her palms against her feverish cheeks, Teia willed Vi from her mind. If she was going to convince Dante to divulge his secrets, she couldn't be thinking of another man. Serum or not, he'd see through her.

Pulse steady, she rapped lightly on the door. "It's me."

There was a shuffling of movement before the door unlatched and Teia was pulled inside.

Dante's room was dark. Teia blinked, allowing her eyes to adjust. The curtains were closed. Only a single candle was lit in the corner—she made a note to steer clear of it. A spare cravat hung from the chair back in front of the vanity and a jacket had been carelessly thrown to the floor. Dante was used to people picking up after him.

And taking care of his personal hygiene, Teia judged from the shadow growing on his jaw.

"I knew you'd come." Dante's lopsided grin was almost boyish despite his shoulders spanning the width of a bull's.

"Did you, now?" Teia replied, cozying up to him.

Dante stared down at her, astonished. Considering how their relationship had ended, she couldn't blame him. Instinctively, her eyes darted to his right shoulder, where she knew a cross-shaped scar marred his otherwise perfect skin. A parting gift.

"I hoped." Dante's voice wavered, and for a moment, Teia a twinge of guilt.

Then she remembered the way he'd lumbered toward her with a broken bottle, screaming for lyrium, and that feeling faded away.

"I didn't do this, Teia," Dante insisted. "It's Bol—"

"Shhh . . . We'll get to that." Lifting herself on her toes, Teia tucked an errant lock of hair behind his ear. "But first—" She pressed her serum-coated lips against his.

Dante stumbled back. Black pupils flooded his blue irises. Teia knew she shouldn't be surprised by the influencer's potency—Viago's concoctions had never failed before—but the speed in which the drug took effect was impressive.

"Come," Teia cooed and led him to the bed. He followed, drugged and docile. After propping Dante up against a mountain of pillows, she curled beside him. "Tell me about Lera."

Dante listlessly ran his fingers through her hair. "I didn't think you were coming back."

I wasn't. I'm not, she thought.

"I couldn't wait any longer," Dante continued. "It was a good match. For both our houses."

Teia perked up. "Match? You were—"

"Engaged. In secret." Dante's head lulled back on the pile of pillows. "Had to be. Caterina would never approve. United, Lera and I could

overrule her. Neither of us want to go to war with the Qunari. We hoped to be married before the summit, but certain *conditions* had to be met."

"Conditions?"

"Lera and I were partners," Dante explained. "Not in love, but in business. And good business thrives on stability. Scandal would not be tolerated. Which meant I had to give up lyrium and Lera had to give up Giuli."

A scorned lover—of course, Teia thought, remembering Giuli's uncharacteristic outburst at dinner. Her resentment toward Dante and her insistence on his guilt suddenly made sense. "I don't suppose Giuli took that well."

"Her only consolation was that Lera promised her Bolivar's seat at the table. The man's bleeding coin. He hasn't personally fulfilled a contract in years."

"And yet," Teia challenged, "you think he's behind the murders. That he's setting you up."

Dante sighed. "Bolivar has a contact in the Carta. In exchange for covering his gambling debts, he supplied me lyrium straight from the Orzammar. It's pure. Not like the watered-down *cazza* the templars get."

Which means it's more dangerous, you idiot. Teia fought the urge to slap him. As long as he was spilling goods like a slashed purse, she could keep her disapproval to herself.

"When Lera and I became engaged, I had to renege on our deal."

"Without explanation?"

"I told him I was getting clean. That he should do the same."

Teia wished she could've been a fly on the wall for that conversation. "Giuli said she saw you and Lera arguing."

"About you." He reached up to caress her cheek. "Lera said our arrangement extended to you as well. I assured her you wouldn't have me." A hint of life flickered in his dazed eyes. "I guess I was wrong."

Teia smiled to keep from gagging. "What happened next?"

"I lost my temper. The withdrawal . . . it was bad that day. But I swear, I didn't touch her. I've haven't—not since . . ." He trailed off and Teia knew he was remembering their last night together. "We argued," he stated finally. "She left. The next time I saw her, she was dead."

Teia scanned his face for signs of deception. She'd told Viago that Dante had been "the faithful sort," and in the bedroom, that was true. But he was still an assassin—and an addict. He was no stranger to lying.

"Your hands aren't shaking now," Teia said, lacing her fingers with his. "You took lyrium, didn't you?"

Dante's face twisted with shame. "I didn't want to. But when I returned to my room after dinner—after Lera—a box was sitting on my desk."

"A lyrium kit just appeared in your room?" Teia asked skeptically.

"Bolivar must've placed it there," he insisted. "I didn't care. I just took it. The shaking. The headaches. I had to make it stop."

"And did it?" Even through the influencer's haze, Dante must've sensed Teia was slipping away. He tried to hold her close, but she sat upright. "Don't lie to me."

"I don't know. I blacked out," he admitted. "Woke up in a pool of my own vomit. That's never happened before."

If not for the influencer, Teia wasn't sure she would've believed him. "Vi said you're the one who found Giuli."

"*Vi*," Dante spat. "Pretentious bastard. I don't know how you can stand him."

"Well, he's never come at me with a bottle."

Dante flinched. The air was oppressive like an infirmary tent in summer. "You should've killed me. I deserved it."

"Men rarely get what they deserve," Teia muttered, eager to change the subject.

"They do when you're involved." He reached over to give her hand a tentative squeeze. "You specialize in the killing of cruel men."

It wasn't something Teia set out to do, but cruel men seemed drawn to her. She didn't mind. They made for easy coin and a good night's rest.

"You're not cruel, Dante."

"Just weak." He quickly brushed a tear from his cheek. Another sign the influencer was working. Teia had never seen Dante cry before.

She could've comforted him, but the words died exhausted in her throat. "What happened with Giuli?"

"I don't know. I wanted to apologize for—well, you saw—and talk things through. But she was dead. Throat slit. My dagger on the floor."

Teia snapped to attention. "What do you mean *your* dagger? There was no dagger."

"I took it. Threw it in the lake, when Emil and I searched the island."

"He didn't see you?"

"We split up to cover more ground." Dante stared up at the ceiling. His Adam's apple bobbed in his throat. "I think I killed her."

Dread chilled her bones, but Teia remained calm and still. "Do you still have the lyrium kit?"

Dante pointed toward the nightstand. She slid off the bed to retrieve it. He'd hidden the wooden box under a handkerchief. She grabbed both.

"Teia," Dante called through the darkness. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"I know," she said, then slammed the side of her hand into his neck, knocking him out cold.

***

From the architecture to the food, Antivan culture was a celebration of romance and the freedom of expression. The typical Antivan craved passion—spontaneity.

Viago was not a typical Antivan.

He liked facts—checklists, numbers, precise measurements. Heart palpitations, clammy hands, tight pants—Viago did not like these things. In fact, he would go so far as to say he hated them. Mild curiosity was his favorite mood. What Teia had elicited in him was akin to an internal natural disaster.

By the time she returned, he'd nearly torn the rug in his room from pacing.

"I've got something for you," Teia practically sang, handing him a box wrapped in a brightly patterned handkerchief. "A lyrium kit. Dante claimed he found it in his room."

"Convenient for an addict."

Viago took the box to his desk and removed its contents one by one, setting them up in a neat line.

"I think the lyrium might be poisoned," Teia suggested. "He blacked out after taking it. Said it made him sick."

"If that's true, our killer's not a seasoned poisoner."

"What makes you say that?"

"Lyrium's an extremely volatile, unpredictable substance," Viago explained as he poured a white powder over the lyrium kit's instruments. "Mixed with a toxin, it will almost certainly overpower the poison and dilute it."

"That's why you don't keep any on you?"

"Like I said, I've no use for it. Most people—even experienced Crows—assume combining two dangerous substances together will produce something even more deadly. But somethings just shouldn't mix."

Once the powder settled, Viago used a dropper to dribble a clear solution onto the kit. "The reaction will take a few minutes."

While they waited, Teia filled him in on Dante's arrangement with Lera, his deal with Bolivar, and that he'd taken his dagger from Giuli's room.

"Your serum worked like a charm." She reached up to brush a bit of nonexistent lint from Viago's coat. He stepped back, tripping over his own feet. Even if it was a compliment, Viago didn't want the image of Dante and Teia in his head.

"The powder should be ready," he replied tersely. He leaned over to check the kit and inhaled sharply as he watched the substance turn purple.

Teia was at his side, her arm lightly brushing his. "Does that mean something?"

"That you were right. Dante was poisoned—with the Quiet Night."

Her rosy cheeks paled. The Quiet Night was a highly lethal toxin. A favorite among the Crows, it put the victim into a deep slumber and slowed their heart until it stopped beating—forever.

"He should be dead."

"If this had been mixed with anything other than lyrium, he would be."

"Then Dante's not our killer?"

Viago tried to ignore the acute stab of disappointment in his gut. "He wouldn't have been able to walk, much less slit Giuli's throat. That cut was clean."

"Then it must be Bolivar."

"*Must* be?" Viago challenged.

"Yes," Teia pressed on. "He must have found out about Dante, Lera, and Giuli's plan to oust him as Sixth Talon and decided to kill all three of them."

"Bolivar's family has been losing ground for years—and he's done nothing but roll over."

"Maybe this time was different. Bolivar wouldn't be the first man desperation gifted a backbone."

"I still don't like it." Flopping down in a chair, Viago groaned. "We're missing something."

"Then let's start from the beginning," Teia suggested. "We know Lera died before dinner, but after her argument with Dante in the garden."

"The absence of defensive wounds implies that she knew her attacker." Thinking back, he conjured the scene of Lera's death in his mind. "Her murder was staged to look like Queen Madrigal's. Everything was the same down to Hessarian's Blade of Mercy."

"No." Teia's eyes flashed with realization. "The lyrium! That part wasn't historically accurate. The killer deliberately wanted to point the blame toward Dante. And how fitting that the incriminating evidence would be lyrium—the crutch of Dante and Bolivar's deal."

Hands on her hips, Teia smiled victoriously, but Viago couldn't share in her enthusiasm. Something still didn't sit right.

"What?" Teia asked. "Why don't you like Bolivar for this? He's an asshole. And he has motive and opportunity."

"But not the *means*," said Viago, trying to keep up with the wheels spinning in his head. "The Blade of Mercy wasn't a shoddy copy, it was a perfect replica. And the poison used to kill the servants—"

"Maferath's Embrace?"

"I have one vial in my possession—it took over a year to make. We know from the tainted lyrium that our killer isn't a master poisoner. So they must've bought it. Another costly expense."

"The pearls around Giuli's neck weren't cheap either," Teia admitted, sinking down on the armrest beside him. "But if it's not us, and it's not Dante or Bolivar, that leaves Nonna and Emil."

Viago wet his lips. "Bolivar wasn't the only Talon who would've been displeased with Lera and Dante's engagement. They wanted to keep their relationship a secret from someone *specific*."

Teia jumped from the armrest—away from him. "Nonna would never—"

"She would," Viago said with a level stare. "If she felt threatened, she would."

Teia wrapped her arms tightly across her chest. "Caterina arranged this summit to protect Antiva, not thin out the competition."

Aware he was walking on eggshells, Viago lowered his voice. "Unless she believed the two were one and the same. The Qunari could soon be

on our doorstep and Lera and Dante were planning to upset the balance of power."

Teia's face was hard with white-hot anger. Something inside Viago warned him to stop, but he wasn't one to leave a point unspoken. "She's the one who brought us to this island with no bodyguards, no servants of our own. She had access to the kitchens—the funds to acquire Maferath's Embrace. And don't you think it's a bit odd she didn't check on Lera after receiving that note at dinner? For all we know, she paid the servants to do the deed, then knocked them off to tidy up loose ends."

"You always think the worst of people," Teia whispered.

"And I'm usually right," Viago spat. "You should know how people are. You grew up in the *dirt*."

He regretted the words immediately. Teia's eyes glossed over with disgust.

"I guess the *dirt* treated me better than your gilded cage."

Viago's own temper flared. "Don't—"

She put a finger to his lips, silencing him. Viago flinched from the contact.

"See, unlike you, I'm not ashamed of where I came from." She stepped back toward the door. "And I don't let it define me."

***

Dinner that evening was a sad affair of cold cuts and cheese. Viago and Dante were still confined to their rooms, but to be safe, the remaining Talons made their own plates and poured their own wine from sealed bottles.

The table had been built for eight, but only four seats were filled. *And one of them is the murderer*, Teia thought coldly. It was such an ugly word —*murderer*. She didn't think it fit her line of work at all. *Assassin* was much nicer. Pushing a bit of cheese around her plate, Teia mused maybe that was the difference between herself and Viago: semantics. Murderer. Assassin. They painted different colors with the same brush.

In the distance, she heard a soft thumping sound. Teia assumed it was a tree branch. Outside, a storm brewed, and the beat was irregular, like something swaying in the wind. She looked around to see if anyone noticed.

Emil and Caterina both seemed enamored with their plates, but Bolivar twitched with each *thump* like it was a jab to the ribs.

If Teia thought the Sixth Talon looked rough this morning, the afternoon had not done him any favors. Dark circles surrounded the elf's gray eyes, giving him a skeletal appearance. He had yet to touch his food, choosing instead to pursue a liquid diet.

The effects of a guilty conscious? Teia pondered, not quite ready to cross him off her list of suspects. A Crow's business was always lucrative. It was feasible Bolivar had sold the pearl-diving operation to pay for the murders. But his lack of obvious coin combined with a history of spinelessness made Teia less certain than she was before.

Still, Bolivar's innocence meant the guilt of either Caterina or Emil. Just the thought made Teia's stomach lurch and she regretted choosing the corseted, red satin gown over the slinkier black number. Emil and Caterina had been the most welcoming when she'd been named Talon. An elf born in an alley with no family or connections, Teia and her rise to power had caused quite the controversy. The Antivan Crows always told new recruits that anyone could become a Talon, but it rarely happened.

Teia glanced furtively at the woman she'd considered a mother for the past twenty years. Caterina wore a gown of dark purple that served as the backdrop for a stunning amethyst necklace.

Viago's words echoed, unwanted, in Teia's mind—*She would. If she was desperate, she would*. As if guilt could be etched on the skin, Teia searched the fine lines of the older Talon's face, but all she found was mild annoyance.

Two seats down, Emil cleared his throat. "Eat something, Bolivar."

"It's that damn noise!" the elf complained. "It's driving me crazy."

Teia was also starting to find the sound unbearable. She thought of Viago upstairs. Their last conversation had left a sour taste in her mouth, but she could stand his company if it meant escaping this room.

"Nonna, should I bring a plate to Dante and Vi? Or do we mean to starve them?"

Caterina rolled her eyes and gestured dismissively. "Take Emil with you."

"You're leaving me? With *her?*" Bolivar pointed accusingly at Caterina.

"Would you rather come with me?" Teia asked. Holding his gaze, she bent over the table to take a sip of his wine.

Bolivar crinkled his nose in disgust.

"I didn't think so." Teia laughed, then joined Emil at the door.

"I'll need a new glass," Bolivar called after them.

"As if drinking from the bottle's ever stopped you before," Teia replied. Emil chuckled at her side.

"Don't let him bother you," he said, when the door shut behind them. "He's only jealous because you're everyone's favorite."

"Even yours?" Teia teased.

"Even mine."

Teia took Emil's arm and steered him toward the kitchen.

The thumping grew louder.

"Do you know how the Crows began?" Emil asked. "Before the masks and the tattoos and the houses?"

Teia thought back to her lessons as a girl. "They were monks—near Treviso? They poisoned a duke who was terrorizing their village."

He nodded approvingly. "They were a group of individuals who did what *needed* to be done to protect the Antivan people. Over the years, we lost sight of that. Now, it's all about family. Blood. Instead of a claw working as one, we fight over scraps. Eventually, we'll all starve."

Thump, thump.

Thump.

Thump.

Goose bumps prickled Teia's brown skin. The noise was right outside the kitchen, between the first and second floors.

She slowed. "I hate to agree with Bolivar, but I don't think that's the wind."

"No, my dear, I don't think it is." From his burgundy jacket, Emil produced a curved dagger. He motioned for Teia to arm herself.

They flanked the servants' entrance, blades raised at the ready. On the count of three, Teia shoved the door open . . .

Just in time to witness Dante Balazar's body crash to the ground.

* * *

Upstairs, Viago was sulking. There was no other word for it.

Since Teia had left, he'd rotated between huffing in a chair to reenacting their earlier exchange in fervent, incoherent whispers—but with cleverer retorts on his part now that he'd had time to think of them. No matter how many ways the conversation played out, Teia's final words stopped him.

"I don't let it define me," he grumbled, recognizing the doubt in his own voice.

Viago was hardly Antiva's only royal bastard. His father had taken many a mistress before and after his mother. To protect the line of succession, the illegitimate children were given a choice: live a life of luxury in exile or join the Crows. Viago was simply the only one who had chosen the latter.

Rising to the rank of Talon should've been enough. With a small army of assassins at his beck and call, Viago was more powerful than the king. But the harder he worked, the more resentful he became of his half-siblings, who knew nothing of ruling or tactics. The knowledge that, if given a chance, he could restore strength to the Crown dogged him—leaving a hole that no contract or coin could fill.

Viago took a deep breath. His clothes, which he'd starched and pressed this morning, felt stale and rumpled from the day's events. Unbidden, the image of Teia moving beneath him—her arms around his neck, a sweet sigh escaping her lips—came to mind. He squeezed his eyes shut to settle the pangs of embarrassment and lust vibrating within him.

A change of clothes and a fresh pair of gloves—that would set things right.

Viago pulled at the buttons of his jacket, unfastening them with sharp, urgent movements. The shirt followed. Then, finger by finger, he tore off his gloves and placed them next to his bed. The inside surface of the gloves shimmered green in the candlelight from where he'd touched Teia's lips earlier.

His exposed flesh shivered in the open air, and Viago imagined his pores gasping and taking deep gulps of air while they still could. He allowed himself a moment to enjoy the relief that rolled over him, then crossed the room to the wardrobe. Upon opening the door, he became distracted by a chip in the wardrobe's decorative carvings. Viago was sure it hadn't been there before—he had an eye for imperfections.

Someone's been here.

The breeze on his back no longer felt refreshing. Viago reached inside for the brass box containing his gloves. Instead of cool metal, his fingers brushed against a line of scales. A forked tongue flicked against his wrist.

Viago wrenched back just as a flat, diamond-shaped head lunged through layers of indigo.

The Crow was quick. The adder was quicker.

Viago growled as the snake's jaws clamped around his forearm. The death adder's fangs sunk deep, pumping his bloodstream with venom.

Cazza, he thought, unceremoniously.

Viago knew the species well. They didn't adorn his walking stick for show. At home, he had a pair of adders whose venom he milked to make Adder's Kiss. But he'd never been bitten by one.

As fast as it came, the snake retreated to the cool shadows of the wardrobe.

Viago slammed the door shut, trapping the creature inside, then staggered back. Already, his muscles were loose and unresponsive—a side effect of the paralyzing component in adder venom. His legs folded like a bad hand of cards, and he hit the ground face-first.

***

Dante's skin was the shade of blood-spattered slate. His lips and nose—broken—were a violent eggplant. A torn bedsheet, knotted together like a rope, was wrapped around his neck. The other end disappeared behind the windowpane—Teia guessed it was tied to something sturdy in his room.

While they'd been eating cheese and drinking wine, Dante's body had been thumping against the side of the villa, until the sheet had finally ripped under his weight.

Teia swallowed down the bile rising in her throat.

"I remember this one—the insatiable Prince Estefan," Emil said behind her. "He had a penchant for high-born married women and used sheets to sneak in and out of their bedroom windows. Until one day, he found a Crow waiting."

The public version of the story was that Estefan had "accidentally" gotten tangled in the bedsheet and broke his neck. Dante's neck was still intact. Judging from the hand-shaped bruising around his mouth, he'd been suffocated, *then* hung out to dry.

Because I knocked him unconscious, Teia thought grimly.

The killer must've hoisted him down from the window. A broken neck would've been a kinder, cleaner death, but if the sheet snapped, Dante might've survived.

"The wife," Teia whispered.

"Sorry?" Emil asked.

"The one whose bedroom Estefan was visiting," she clarified. "Remind me—what happened to her?"

"Ah. Marcella." Emil gave his close-cut beard a rueful rub. "A beauty. She loved pretty things. They hid a death adder among her clothes."

"The same night?" Teia asked, trying to keep her voice level.

"I believe so, why—" As he asked, Emil followed her line of thought.

"Vi!" she rasped, then bolted toward the stairs.

***

Breathe, you idiot, Viago told himself. The more he panicked, the faster the venom spread. He only hoped his daily dose of Adder's Kiss had built up his immune system enough to buy some time.

Through sheer will, Viago pushed himself up on his elbows and dragged his sluggish body toward the desk—toward his case.

"Antivenin," he stated through gritted teeth.

The case had a leather strap. If he could get close, all he needed to do was reach up and pull. *And, hopefully, not break a bunch of other lethal poisons over my head.*

Black spots stained the edges of his vision. His face muscles went slack, causing drool to trickle from the corner of his mouth. Viago knew with cold, logical horror that he was going to pass out.

His right arm extended—and hit one of the desk's four legs. The strap dangled above his head, taunting him.

Just a bit more, Viago thought, but even thinking was like wading through molasses now.

His eyelids drooped.

There was a loud *thud* in the distance.

Then all was dark and silent.

***

In the few, short seconds it had taken Teia to get up the stairs, she had prepared herself to find Viago on the floor. Perhaps dying. Perhaps already dead.

But not shirtless—*never* shirtless.

"You know," she groaned, turning him over. "This isn't how I imagined seeing you naked."

Despite her flippant tone, Teia's heart pounded against her ribs. Viago's breathing was leaden, but present—*thank the Maker*. A quick scan revealed two puncture wounds on his forearm. The skin surrounding the bite marks was swollen and had turned a sickly hue of plum.

His throat emitted a guttural noise.

"Vi!" She brought her ear to hover above his lips.

With substantial effort, Viago pushed out the words, "Wearing . . . trousers."

Teia didn't know whether to hit or kiss him. "You stupid, silly, stubborn man. Tell me you have antivenin."

Viago lifted his right finger and pointed toward the leather case. Teia jumped to her feet. Inside the case were rows of vials labeled with charming but exceedingly unhelpful names such as Meet the Maker and the Snuff of Legends.

"Which one is it?"

From the floor, she heard incoherent gurgling.

"Really, Vi?" Teia snapped. "You can correct me on your state of undress, but not a word on which vial will save your life?"

This time her question was met with silence.

"Vi?"

Dropping back down to the floor, she checked his pulse. It was faint—dangerously so. If she didn't find the antivenin soon, his heart and lungs would shut down.

Cursing, Teia grabbed the case and continued the search. To her mounting frustration, not one vial simply said what it was. "If you survive this, we are definitely coming up with a sensible naming convention."

Finally, her hand stilled over one called Up and Adder. Teia winced. "I should let you die for that."

Picking up the vial, she returned to Viago's side and lifted his wounded forearm. Bracing herself to suck out the venom, Teia took a couple of deep breaths, then hesitated.

What if she was wrong? Teia knew how to properly coat a blade in deathroot extract, but her expertise primarily laid in killing people—not healing them.

Viago's breath deteriorated to a wheezing rattle.

No time for second guesses, Teia told herself, and lowered her mouth to cover the inflamed skin. A vile mix of metallic and bitter flavors assaulted her tongue. Teia spit the infected blood on the floor and gagged.

"The things I do for you," she said with more worry than fire.

Teia uncorked the vial, and after uttering a quick prayer to Andraste, poured its contents into the two small holes in Viago's arm.

* * *

When Viago woke, it felt like someone had drained the blood from his body and replaced it with sludge. But it wasn't all bad—someone who smelled like coffee and cinnamon was playing with his hair.

"Water," he croaked.

The fingers stilled, and the surface beneath his head shifted.

Something cool touched his lips. He extended his neck eagerly and almost fainted again as a steady stream of liquid passed over his chapped lips and traveled down his throat. It was delightfully cold.

"Slowly," Teia whispered. "You'll drown yourself."

He took one last gulp, then heeded her warning.

"How do you feel—on a scale of absolute shit to dying?"

"Tolerable."

"Liar." Her fingers resumed stroking his hair. It felt better than the water.

It felt better than anything.

They sat that way for a while, both dizzy with relief.

"Don't open the wardrobe," Viago said finally.

"But how will I get you a new pair of gloves?"

He frowned. "The old ones will do."

"Or . . ." Teia dragged out the word hopefully. "You could go without. They didn't save you from the adder. None of your precious 'precautions' did."

"Actually . . ." Viago preened. "My daily dose of Adder's Kiss slowed down the venom. I'd be dead if not for that."

"You'd be dead if not for *me*," Teia corrected.

He swallowed—his throat thick with pride. "The adder—how did you know?"

A shadow passed over Teia's features. "Dante's dead. Strangled in bed-sheets like Prince Estefan."

She paused. Viago knew he should offer condolences—it was the polite thing to do—but he wasn't particularly sorry about Dante's fate. Instead, he filled in the blanks to allow Teia a moment to grieve.

"And since his mistress died the same night, you thought the killer might also strike twice."

Teia nodded, glancing away.

Don't cry for him. Viago knew it was an unfair plea—silent or not. But Dante wasn't worth her tears. *No one is*.

"You clever, clever girl," Viago whispered, raising his hand to stroke her cheek. His limbs still felt like they were saddled with sandbags, but it was worth the effort to finally feel the softness of her skin against his bare fingertips.

She leaned into his touch, covering his hand with hers.

"It's my fault," she confessed. "Earlier, I knocked Dante unconscious. It seemed like a good idea at the time—a quick getaway. I didn't think about leaving him vulnerable."

"You're not the one who snapped his neck."

He'd meant the statement to be comforting, but Teia cringed at the blunt description. "His neck wasn't broken. He suffocated."

Adrenaline pumped through Viago's veins, clearing the residual fog in his brain. "Prince Estefan's neck snapped."

"I know," she said, a little irritated. "There was bruising around Dante's mouth and nose. The killer must've suffocated him by hand, then lowered him from the window. A long drop would've risked the sheet ripping."

He muscled his way to a sitting position. "You're sure?"

"I wasn't there so not one hundred percent," Teia answered, now clearly irritated. "But if the sheets ripped from him dangling there, then there's no way they could've withstood a long drop."

Viago's gaze settled on the gloves next to his bed. A feline smile spread across his thin lips. "Fetch my shirt. I know who did this."

***

Viago and Teia hobbled together down the grand staircase. She could feel him trying to put most of his weight on that garish walking stick. Viago's shirt was soaked through with sweat, but he refused to slow down or remove the jacket she'd draped across his shoulders.

He'd also not foregone the gloves. Knowing what was to come, she could forgive him that.

Their fellow Talons were in one of the villa's three sitting rooms. Bolivar's shrill voice echoed through the halls—leading them there like bread crumbs.

"You can't stop me!" he yelled as they opened the door. "I'm signaling the mainland and getting off this island. Pride's not worth dying for."

"Shut up, Bolivar," Viago groaned.

Three pairs of eyes turned to greet them. Bolivar and Emil were standing at opposite ends of the room, while Caterina sat, calm and poised, in the middle. Despite the balmy temperature outside, someone had built a fire.

Well, that's convenient, Teia noted.

"Maker's breath!" Bolivar exclaimed upon seeing Viago's haggard appearance.

Emil stepped forward in a helpful gesture. He assisted Teia in settling Viago on the settee next to Caterina, who scrunched her nose and inched away. "Still alive. Good."

"We thought the worst," Emil admitted.

"Where's your optimism?" Viago's skin was corpse pale, but his eyes twinkled knowingly.

"Dead," Bolivar spat. "Like Dante and Giuli and Lera—and *us* if we don't leave this cursed place."

"We're not leaving," Caterina said coolly.

"I'm done listening to you, you old h—"

"Then listen to me," Viago cut in. "I know who killed them."

The room fell quiet. He made a show of staring each Talon in the eye.

He's drawing this out on purpose, Teia thought, her muscles twitching with anticipation.

"Well?" Caterina said.

Viago steepled his fingers together. Despite his pallor, he looked the part of a king in judgment.

Teia watched the other Talons shift uncomfortably. She picked up the iron poker next to the fireplace and stoked the flames. In an

interrogation, a little heat went a long way.

Once visible beads of sweat were rolling down Bolivar's forehead, Viago said, "I need everyone's gloves."

The three exchanged confused glances, then looked to Teia for insight. She smiled pleasantly.

"*Your gloves*, please," Viago repeated. He was practically giddy now.

"What about her?" Bolivar asked, nodding toward Teia.

"I'm not wearing gloves."

"Yes. Well," the elf replied, flustered. "What are you going to do with them? These are expensive, you know."

"A simple test. You've nothing to fear," Viago reassured. "*If* you're innocent."

Bolivar was not reassured. None of them were.

Teia's patience began to fray. "Don't you want to know who did this? Don't you want to go home?"

"Of course, but—"

"Then hand over the gloves." The *Or I'll make you* was implied by her tone—and the red-hot poker in her grip.

Caterina was the first to give in. She removed four heavy, jewel-encrusted rings, then slipped off the silk, elbow-length gloves underneath.

When the men were hesitant to follow, she barked, "Do it."

Viago waited until all three held their gloves aloft. Then, with some effort, he pulled himself to his feet to collect each pair.

"I assume Emil has appraised you of Dante's demise?" he asked.

"Strangled in bedsheets," Caterina replied.

"Not bedsheets."

"Excuse me?"

"Someone suffocated him first, then staged the scene to look like Prince Estefan's murder," Teia explained. "His nose was broken and there were bruises around his mouth. *Finger-shaped* bruises."

"Why go through the trouble if they were going to hang him?" Bolivar groused and reluctantly handed over his fur-lined gloves to Viago.

"Because they knew the sheets wouldn't hold," Emil stated.

With the gloves in hand, Viago limped over to the fireplace. Teia stood defensively between him and the other Talons.

"What the killer *didn't* know was that Dante's lips were coated with an influencing serum that shines green in candlelight." Viago stood in front of the fireplace with a smile that could cut metal. The flames licked up, hungry and waiting. "Whose shall I test first?"

No one volunteered. Teia waited, her nerves raw. Blood would be spilt tonight. She could already smell it in the air.

The silence was broken by a slow clap. "Bravo," Emil applauded. "I should've killed you first."

He pulled the curved dagger from his jacket pocket and lunged forward, crossing the room in three strides. He swiped toward Viago, aiming for the jugular.

Men. Always in such a rush. Teia deftly slid between Emil and Viago. Arching her back, she curled under Emil's blade, then stabbed his boot—skin, bone, and leather—with the iron poker. His dagger clattered on the ground.

"A gentleman like you should know better," Teia purred, grinding the poker into the wooden floor. "Ladies first."

He didn't scream like she expected. Old Crows were built of sturdy stuff.

"I was saving you for last," Emil snarled, blood oozing from the sole of his boot. "You really are my favorite."

Teia felt the knife before she saw it. It was a mean little thing. She twisted just in time for it to only graze her ribs.

The other sleeve, she realized, too late.

"Teia!" Viago cried.

Emil's hand shot out again—then faltered.

A sickening *crack* echoed through the room as Caterina brought her cane down against Emil's skull. He stumbled forward, blindly stabbing the air with his newly revealed dagger, but the poker held him in place.

Caterina hit him again. This time square in the back. He fell to one knee, dropping the second blade.

"Know when to bow out gracefully," she sniffed, kicking both weapons away.

Viago staggered over to Teia. He reached for the slash on her side, then caught himself and clenched his fist. She gave him a reassuring nod and fetched her blade from beneath her skirts.

The remaining Crows surrounded Emil.

"Always wondered if that cane hurt as bad as it looked," Emil said.

"What's the verdict?" Caterina asked, positioning the cane's handle next to his temple. "If you need a refresher, I'm happy to oblige."

Emil spit a molar onto the floor. "It's spot-on."

"Why?" Bolivar asked. "Why would you do this?"

"Money," Caterina stated plainly. "It's always money with Emil."

He choked out a pained laugh. "It's always money with all of us. That's the problem. In the beginning, we were protectors. We fought for Antiva—for the people. Then somewhere along the way we chose profit over patriotism."

"So, what? You're killing us pro bono?" Viago sneered.

"Not exactly," Emil confessed. "The Qunari *are* coming. I was approached and presented a contract—an opportunity—for a peaceful invasion. In exchange for seven deaths, we could keep our way of life. They wouldn't make us submit to the Qun."

"And you believed them," Teia scoffed.

Emil squared his shoulders. "The Qunari are many things—brutal, rigid, merciless warriors—but they are also honorable."

"There was no honor in Ventus," Viago growled. "They pulled magisters from their homes. Clapped them in irons, destroyed their minds with poison, and paraded them through the streets."

"It would be different here," Emil whispered, his conviction diminishing. "That's why I made the deal."

Caterina hissed, "You made the deal so that you would be the only house left. No more sharing of contracts. No more territory disputes. The Kortez family would be the only family."

"Under one Talon, we might actually get something done."

Even Bolivar laughed at this. "The assassins of House Balazar, Valisti, and Arainai would never submit to you. You killed their Talons."

"Every life is worth a price. And I have the coin to pay it. We're nothing but a glorified guild of mercenaries now."

Emil glared up at them, his body twisting awkwardly from being pinned down by the iron poker.

He reminded Teia of the rabid dogs that roamed the docks of Antiva City. Their patchy, mangy fur smelled like wet leather and their snarls were mucus-filled warnings. She remembered, as a child, hiding in a tanner's vat, knee-deep in watery dung, hoping the dogs wouldn't smell the fresh bread she'd stolen from the market. Of all the things from her life before the Crows, it was those dogs that haunted her the most.

They'd gone wrong.

"Crows aren't mercenaries, Emil," she said, lifting her dagger. "We have standards. And you're beneath them."

Following Teia's lead, Viago, Bolivar, and Caterina all raised their blades. The steel glinted in the fire's light.

Emil spat again—a bloody, bubble-filled blob of saliva. "Go on, then."

As one, the Talons descended upon him. Sharp claws of metal rose and fell until each Crow got their pound of flesh.

***

The next morning, with Caterina's permission, they signaled the mainland.

Unsurprisingly, Bolivar was the first to leave. After disposing of Emil's body, Caterina had tried to include him in discussions about the Qunari. With half her Talons dead, Antiva was more vulnerable than ever. But Bolivar refused to speak to anyone. He simply grabbed a bottle of wine and barricaded himself in his room until the boats arrived. Viago thought it was for the best. Bolivar didn't have much to offer the war effort.

Once Bolivar was gone and the bodies of the fallen had been brought to shore, the three remaining Talons settled in to plot a defense against the Qunari invasion. It was no longer a question of *if* but *when* they were coming and Antiva needed to be prepared for any time line. Killing four Talons was a mighty first blow, but the Qunari had made a grave mistake: they didn't finish the job.

After three days of talks, they had a plan. Caterina had spent the final night writing letters to the heirs of each house.

"We're going to have to remember a whole new set of names," Viago groaned to Teia as they watched three servants pack her trunks into a very top-heavy gondola.

"Yes, that's the real tragedy here," she replied, rolling her eyes. "I hope the new Talons don't feel we overstepped by having the summit without them."

"It's not our fault their predecessors got themselves killed." A servant approached to take the cage in Viago's hand. "Careful," Viago warned. "He bites."

“I can’t believe you’re keeping that snake,” Teia said, shaking her head. “It almost killed you.”

“Which is more than any man can say. He deserves my respect. And a good home—with all the mice he can eat.”

“But did you have to name it Emil?” Teia asked, making a face.

“An homage. You’re always telling me to recognize my fellow Talons.”

Teia sighed. “I only hope the *real* Emil acted alone. I’d hate to add more bodies to the pyre.”

Viago grunted. “House Kortez is dead. Caterina will see to that.”

“She’ll be fair,” Teia challenged.

“She’ll be ruthless. Just like House Gaspari.”

“Who?”

“Exactly.” Viago smirked. “Mark my words—she’ll bring her demon of a grandson back from Tevinter to do the job personally.”

A shiver passed through them both.

“What did you call my grandson?” a voice behind them asked.

Viago let out a nervous laugh. Caterina pushed past them to stare out over the water. Despite what had happened, she still stood with her back straight and her expression fierce.

“What an absolute disaster,” she muttered.

“We stopped him, Nonna,” Teia said, coming to stand next to her. “The Qunari didn’t win.”

“Didn’t they?” Caterina asked, stealing the words from Viago’s mouth. “I’m not so sure.”

“I am,” Teia stated, her bloodthirsty tone surprising them both. “We’re not going to grant these bastards a quiet death. We’re going to show all of Thedas why no one messes with the Antivan Crows.” She squeezed Caterina’s hand. “They are going to regret this, Nonna.”

A faint smile graced Caterina’s lips. She patted Teia on the shoulder, then continued toward the dock.

A breeze rustled through the trees overhead. The sun peeked through the clouds to warm the back of Viago’s collar.

“We should go with her,” he said, trudging forward.

Teia snatched his walking stick and twirled it in the air.

“Are you going straight home to Salle?”

He sighed and shook his head. “Antiva City.”

“To brief His Royal Fatherliness?” She balanced the stick on the tip of her boot.

He reached for it. “Why are you asking?”

With a kick, she flung the stick onto her other foot. “To see if you had a place to stay.”

She held him with a brazen smile. He remembered the feel of her cheek under his fingers, of her hips against his.

“Is that an invitation?”

“Is that a yes?”

He reached out again. This time, she let him have the walking stick, but held on to the end. Viago drew her close, until they were a breath apart.

“It’s a definite maybe,” he murmured.

Teia beamed up at him. “My favorite answer.”

HALF UP FRONT

JOHN EPLER

It was the kind of place you went to be invisible. Perfect for the sort of business I was there to conduct. It was also about the only place I could go as an altus, even a former one, and drink without worrying about poison in the whiskey, or a dagger in the ribs.

No signs advertised the bar's existence. No barkers stood outside, no stylized ale casks hanging in front gave any hint as to its true purpose. A nondescript door, in a nondescript wall, in a nondescript quarter of Minrathous. It wasn't the kind of place you stumbled across—either you knew about it and were there, or you didn't and weren't.

Through the door, a narrow hallway and a set of stairs leading underground. A second door, propped open by a large piece of driftwood, opened into a large, low-ceilinged space. The walls were rough-hewn stone, the ceiling crisscrossed by smoke-stained wooden beams.

Inside, a handful of mismatched tables, scattered against the walls. One chair, the seat pulled from a wagon. Another, the broken pews from an Andrastian chantry. Large rugs kept the floor warm, and in the middle of the room, a single magically animated piano, someone's vain attempt at injecting a little additional class into the space, plinking away a sad little tune, off-key and discordant.

There was no bartender—or at least, none that you ever saw. There was a large shelf, though, with two small doors and a basket. You put your coin in the basket and slid it through one door. And almost immediately, your drink came out the other side. No change—you paid the price to the copper. That seemed to be how it knew what to serve you. It was the sort of casual use of magic you got used to, living in Tevinter, but I still thought it was pretty impressive.

The drinks shared the same haphazard air as the seating, coming in all variety of glasses, mugs, and alchemical equipment. The clientele was similarly eclectic, nobles and magisters sharing tables and conversation with commoners, mercenaries. The low murmur was muted—dissonant.

I sipped my whiskey, my third of the night, and brushed a stray lock of long brown hair out of my eyes. I hated winter. The clothes were bulky and uncomfortable, and the dry air made a mess of my hair. But the warmth of the alcohol filled my belly, taking away the bitter edge of cold that had snuck in from outside. It snowed, but only lightly. Still, my least favorite time of year.

Across from me sat the woman I'd come there to meet. She was dressed in a bulky, shape-obscuring robe and a thick winter hat that never left her head. And she didn't drink. Or rather, she was drinking water, sipping it disdainfully. I'd taken an immediate dislike to her, but she'd offered me twice my usual fee. So I'd listen, hear her out. Decide where to go from there.

She hadn't given me a name. I hadn't asked for one. That was how things worked. No names, only a place, a reason to be there, and half up front. We sat in silence for another minute, before she gingerly placed her glass on the table and leaned forward, steepling her fingers.

"You come highly recommended, Magister Vadis. Your reputation precedes you."

I scowled. "Former. Altus. Vadis." I spoke each word slowly, deliberately. Altus, not magister. I'd never been a magister—my father filled that seat for our family. And I'd left the nobility behind, so even *altus* was past tense. "My one rule is no names. You don't know a damned thing about me."

She arched an eyebrow. "The disgraced daughter of Magister Mareno Vadis. Lover of an elven servant."

"Former servant," I corrected her, a little more harshly than I'd intended. It was an important point. My romantic relationship with Irian

Cestes had started after she'd left my family's employ. Would've been weird, otherwise, and a little too Tevinter on my part to ignore the class dynamics in play.

"Very well. *Former* servant. Your family saw scandal, gave you a choice. You chose her. I find that commendable, personally, but your father did not. So now you work as a thief." She leaned forward. "I would never dream of revealing your identity. But I think it's important that you know that my resources are . . . vast."

I glowered. I tried hard to keep my two lives separate. My father and I were no longer on speaking terms, but even so, an altus—even a former one—who moonlit as a master thief was the sort of thing that you didn't want to get out. I didn't like the idea of this asshole knowing so much about me. To hell with her.

I drained my drink in a single swallow and put the empty glass on the table. I stood.

"One thing you should know about me—I don't take kindly to intimidation. We're done here." I started to walk away.

"Intimidation was hardly my goal. I merely wanted to give you an idea of the information at my fingertips. However, I still find myself needing your help." She gestured at my seat. "Please. Hear me out—I'll pay you half your fee. Just for listening."

I glowered at her, but half my fee to have a conversation was tempting. I still had some savings, but by and large, my assets were less liquid than I preferred—except for those that were *more* liquid, like the thirty-year-old Ferelden whiskey in front of me—and I'd burn before I asked my father for help. Besides, it wasn't like I had anything better to do. I sat back down. She reached into her satchel and pulled out a large piece of parchment tied with waxed string. She slid it across the table. I unrolled it and examined it.

It was a rubbing of some sort, covered in runes. Old—really, *really* old. Before-Tevinter-existed old. Nothing I recognized, which wasn't a surprise. Ancient lore wasn't exactly my area of expertise—I made a note to ask Irian about it. I looked up. She gazed at me expectantly.

"You are Andrastian, yes? A member of the Chantry in good standing?"

"Feels like you already know the answer to that question," I snarled, a little more forcefully than I'd intended.

"Indulge me, please."

"Yes. I'm a dues-paying, Maker-fearing, old-gods-denying Chantry member. Good standing is another thing."

She shrugged. "But you don't believe. Not truly."

I hesitated. It was a complicated question—and one I didn't particularly feel like getting into with this client. I had the feeling, though, that she wouldn't be satisfied with anything but the complete truth.

"I guess I have some thoughts about the incompatible idea of a benevolent Maker and all the awful shit that happens here, yeah."

She nodded.

"Then you know the significance of Dumat's Folly." She gestured at the rubbing I held in front of me. So that's what it was.

"Supposed to be a piece of the Black City itself. A 'reminder of man's hubris, and of the unique and glorious divinity of the Maker.'" I snorted. "Seems like a bunch of nug shit to me."

"Regardless. The artifact has been stolen. By who, I do not know. For what purpose, I do not know. But I would like you to find the answer to both questions. And for that, I will pay you triple your usual rate."

Well, now. That was unexpected. Dumat's Folly was kept in the Archon's palace. It was deceptively well guarded. Magical traps, around-the-clock armed guards. Easy enough to get in, but getting out was another story. One hell of a place to rob. I'd done a job there once, and it was the reason my left knee ached when it was cold. My professional curiosity was piqued.

Still, this wasn't something I wanted to get tangled up in. The Chantry was dangerous, powerful, and pissing off the Archon seemed like a good way to find yourself chained up in some slave ship or another, a one-way ticket to parts unknown. I shook my head.

"Look, you want something stolen, I'm your woman. But this? It's Chantry shit. Talk to the templars. Or the justicars."

"There are . . . aspects of the theft that suggest they may have had help from within. No. I cannot trust the Chantry or any of its agents. And it must be done in secret. None can know of your efforts."

I shrugged. "Then find a private investigator. I hear Neve Gallus is good. And she takes appointments."

"I do not require an investigator. I need a thief. And I had heard you're the best—or close enough."

I didn't react to the flattery. I knew I was good. "If you're trying to figure out where that thing went, I'm not going to be much help."

"You misunderstand me. Finding out what happened to the artifact is only one part of the job. I also want you to steal it back."

So that was the game, then. And it explained why she didn't want to go to the Chantry directly. Bored rich magisters, fighting over artifacts that they'd lock away in some vault after they got them. Status symbols, and nothing more.

"And you have unique talents," she added. "There are many thieves in Tevinter. There are very few who are also mages."

"Why a mage?" I was curious, despite myself.

"Forgeries abound." She slid a small wrapped package across the table. I opened it, picked it up. The edges were sharper than they looked, and I sliced my finger. I scowled and stuck the finger in my mouth. Wordlessly, she offered me a cloth, and I used it to wipe the blood away, before stuffing it in my pocket. Never a good idea to let someone else get ahold of your blood. Lots of nasty things that they could do with it.

"A rune? What am I supposed to do with this?"

"It is part of the artifact. Separated from it long ago. It has resonance with the whole—and it will allow you to discern whether what you hold is the real Dumat's Folly. Touch it to the artifact when you find it. Channel energy between the two—and you will know if it is real."

I leaned back and sighed. I didn't like stealing religious artifacts. Not even if I was just stealing it back. Too much baggage, and it meant getting involved in people's faith.

But hell. Professional pride was worth something. Someone had gotten in and out, with one of the Chantry's most valuable artifacts to boot. And again, it wasn't as if Irian and I were swimming in coin.

"Fine. But I have a couple of conditions. One." I held up a finger. "I do it my way. No bullshit from you. Two." A second finger. "If I find out you're playing me, this turns out to be some kind of setup, we're going to have more than words. Three. I reserve the right to call this off at any time. Things start to feel weird, I'm out. Clear?"

She nodded."Of course." She tossed me a small pouch she'd produced from somewhere. I opened it and blinked. It was stuffed with gold coins. More than she'd promised, and a lot more than the half up front I always asked for. "So. Do we have a deal?"

That was it, really. Despite my posturing, I needed the money. More accurately, *we* needed the money. Minrathous was expensive, and Irian and I hadn't found honest employment easy to come by. Being blacklisted by a magister, especially one as petty as my father, tended to do that.

The client had me over a barrel. Saying no to this job wasn't an option —at least, not a realistic one. I sighed.

"Deal."

* * *

"Again."

We stepped back, wooden staves held loosely. The room was big. A dining room for two dozen servants. The tables and chairs were shoved haphazardly to the side, and where they'd sat were weapon racks filled with training equipment. Wooden swords, blunted arrows, and various protective equipment. In the middle where we stood was a large circle, marked on the ground in chalk.

Across from me, Irian Cestes, elven hunter and staff-fighting expert, waited, her pose relaxed but always ready; she seemed only moments away from springing into action. She sweated, lightly, and still looked almost perfect. I was soaked, and knew that the workout had me looking particularly filthy. My hair was tied back from my face with a leather strap, but it still kept falling limply into my eyes.

I assumed the combat pose she'd spent the last three hours trying to teach me, knees slightly bent, staff held perpendicular to my body. Every muscle was sore, tired, but I kept at it. Bowing to each other, I started the pattern. *Swing, swing, duck, swing*. She caught each blow on her own staff, her movements effortless, bored. She sighed.

"No, not like that. Like this." The swing came unexpectedly, and I raised to block too slowly. It hit me just under the elbow, sending a jolt of pain up my arm, and my own staff clattered woodenly to the ground. Turning slightly, she reversed the direction of her swing, sweeping my legs out from under me and sending me tumbling.

The point of her staff pushed under my chin, right at my throat. I grabbed it with both hands, twisting, and she lost her own balance, falling to the ground. I rolled and pinned her arms to the ground,

smiling triumphantly. Right until her elbow caught me under the ribs and the breath whoofed out of me.

She got to her feet slowly, gingerly, and reached out her hand to help me up. I waved off the assistance, slowly straightening, and gave her a pained smile to show her that there were no hard feelings. Just bruises.

"I think it's time to take a break." She tossed her staff to the side and stretched. I got up and walked to the small table. I poured two glasses of water, offering one to Irian. It was our rule—whoever lost in practice took care of drinks. It had been 207 days since she'd needed to do so. Not that I was keeping track.

She took it with a silent nod of thanks. I drained my own and poured a second one, pressed the cool glass to my forehead. She sipped from her glass slowly, watching me, her look equal parts affection and consternation.

We'd known each other for years. She'd worked for my family as a servant, and we'd started to get close. But being from different classes had its own problems—no matter what, it would always cast a shadow over our relationship. So I'd found her a job somewhere else—a high-ranking post within the Magisterium—and we'd become more than friends.

My father had been furious—more at losing her skills, I think, than at me, but still. So I'd been given a choice. Not a hard one, as it turned out, but my father had taken it personally, cut me off. I was fine with it. It was part of what made my relationship with Irian work—neither of us really gave a damn about what people thought.

And it helped that she was an excellent combat instructor. As a mage, you already spent most of your time carrying around a big, heavy piece of wood. Might as well learn the best way to hit people with it. I poured myself another glass, drinking this one slowly, conscious of her eyes on me.

"Something on your mind?" she asked, her tone casual. I shook my head, started to deny, and then sighed. Nodded. She knew me. Could see through my bullshit. Anything other than the truth was going to lead to an argument.

"Just a client."

"The one who was going to pay double?" she asked, sitting down beside me. She started to rub my shoulders, gently at first, and then

harder. I groaned. I was tense. Little bit from the training, little bit from the elf.

"Yeah. Except she made it triple. Kind of an asshole. Could tell she thinks she's smarter than everyone else." She gave me a look and snorted. I ignored it, professionally. "Anyways. She wants something stolen—well, sort of. Stolen back."

"What is it that she wants?" she asked, her fingers continuing to knead the tension out of my shoulders.

"Mmm. That feels great."

She smiled. "Glad you like it. What was it she wanted you to steal back?" she repeated.

"Dumat's Folly." The massage stopped. I opened my eyes and turned to look at her. Surprise was evident on her features. She ran a hand through her thick black hair, brushing a few damp strands out of her eyes, and shook her head.

"But they keep that—I mean, it's in the Archon's palace. Remember the Pavus job?"

"Every time it's cold."

"How did they manage that?" she mused, her interest clearly piqued. "And why hasn't—I mean, why steal that? It has no power. It doesn't do anything." I shrugged, my aching muscles protesting every moment of the gesture. I gave her a pointed look and nodded at her, hinting. She ignored it.

"Turn it down. Last time you did a job there, you almost died."

I shrugged. "I twisted my knee. That's a pretty long way from 'almost dying.'"

"It could've been a lot worse, and you know it."

"It's a lot of money. Enough to finally, permanently, cut ties with my father. Enough to have our own life."

"That's not it."

I narrowed my eyes. "Oh, yeah? What's it about, then?" I made no attempt to hide the heat in my voice.

She looked at me levelly. "Pride. That Pavus job. The Archon's palace beat you—and now you want a chance to try again. Make up for your mistakes. Because you can't stand not being the best."

"Like hell. This is about the money, nothing else. Three times my fee is a whole lot. Unless you've found some other form of gainful

employment, this is how we keep from getting kicked out into the streets. And it's damned cold out there."

"If it's only about the money, then why aren't you an altus? That kind of power, they pay you just for showing up. Why'd you get yourself kicked out, become a thief?"

"You know damn well why. For you. Because I 'disgraced my family' by taking up with an elf. An 'employee.'"

She shook her head. "That's part of it, certainly. But not all of it. It's because you were never the best. Because being average has never been good enough for you. Like your father." She paused, her eyes widening as she realized what she'd said.

She'd crossed a line. I leapt to my feet, started to speak, started to shout—and instead, turned away and walked out, into the study across the hallway.

I fumed, white-hot anger filling my veins with fire. What business was it of hers? What gave her the right to speak of me like that?

I knew the answer, of course. It was because she was right.

Second place is the first loser, my father had always told me. He was a cruel man, well suited for life in the Empire, and I hated him—but he wasn't wrong. I had to be the best.

Irian walked into the room. Her expression was regretful, and she held two glasses. Not water, but whiskey. I took one from her, but held it, not drinking. She sipped the other one.

"Look—" she started, and I held up a hand, forestalling her apology.

"Forget it." I gave her a smile. No hard feelings. She returned it, a little unsure, and I kissed her. We stood like that for a minute before we pulled apart. I sat down heavily in one of the large mismatched armchairs, my aching knees thanking me.

"You're right. But not completely. Pride's part of it, for sure. But the pay's good. Enough to relax for a little while. Maybe go to Orlais, see Val Royeaux. Go to one of those little countryside estates. Eat all the cheese your heart desires." I hesitated. "Might even be enough to start over somewhere else. Still. We make this decision together. We're a team."

She sighed, and then leaned in, kissing me gently on the forehead.

"You'll never leave Minrathous. You say you hate it, and maybe part of you does. But everything you love is here." She smiled. "Everyone you love, too." I embraced her, and we held each other closely, my chin resting on the top of her head.

I didn't like to admit it, but she was right. I knew the city. Knew all the bars that would let you drink on credit, the restaurants that would always make the food just right. It was broken, it was messy, it was home—or at least, the closest thing to it.

The hug slackened, ended. She stepped back and looked in my eyes. Seeming to come to a decision, she sighed and shook her head. "Fine. We'll do the job. I can't say I like it. But . . ." She paused, and then grinned. "I am holding you to Val Royeaux."

***

The Archon's palace filled the Minrathous skyline. Dominated it—it was visible from pretty much anywhere. When you first came to the city, you spent a few weeks admiring it, in awe of it. Eventually, you got used to it, and it became part of the background, like the sun or the clouds.

Tourists loved it, though. Nobles from Orlais, from Antiva—the only ones who could afford to make the trip. The roadways outside were always crowded, full of people representing the nicer parts of Thedas. And, of course, those who preyed on them. Had to admire that local entrepreneurial spirit.

Our entrance into the palace was a long way from the glittering arches of its front gates. No matter how beautiful the façade, every building needed a servants' entrance, and we sat on the rooftops opposite. Much less glamorous—you could smell the stench of the sewers here, and there was little attention paid to appearances. The contrasts of Minrathous, in the flesh, so to speak.

At this time of night, the streets were quiet. A pair of guards walked patrol, talking amiably. They paid little attention to their rounds, giving the palace only a cursory glance. The light from their lanterns receded, disappeared around the corner, the sound of footsteps growing fainter and fainter. We waited. Five minutes. Six. I started to get antsy. But ten minutes passed and still, nothing.

No one else came. Didn't meant they wouldn't, though. My entire body was tense, waiting for the shout of a second patrol that was absolutely going to come at the worst possible time as we slipped through the shadows, across the road, and started to climb.

The crumbling stonework on this decidedly less public façade of the palace provided most of the footholds. The climbing axes we'd brought

with us managed the rest, and before long we were up on the lower roof. I glanced below. There, just coming around the corner, the lantern of another patrol. Eleven minutes. They were supposed to come every four minutes.

I stepped through the opening and dropped to the ground, landing awkwardly. Beside me, almost feline in her grace, Irian. Show-off. She wore all black, like me, but where my clothes revealed someone who enjoyed the finer things in life a little more than she should, hers showed off the body of an athlete. And they were tighter. I swallowed, tried to focus.

We moved quietly, quickly through the halls, our only close call coming when a pair of elven servants walked by. We stepped into a side room and waited, ready to offer either a convincing explanation or, if that failed, a blackjack to the back of the head. No deaths. We weren't about to kill a servant for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. But their few hours unconscious would give us the time we needed. They passed without incident, though, and we carefully made our way into the main hall proper.

"All right," I whispered. Louder than I'd meant to. Stress. It'd been a long time since I'd been here, and my last memories of the palace weren't very pleasant.

I tried again. Quieter. "We have about ten minutes until the guards come back this way. We need to be gone. I don't really want to explain why we're in the Archon's palace at three in the morning." She nodded.

I examined the hall professionally, dispassionately. It seemed surprisingly unguarded, the artifacts and spoils of war protected only by the thin glass of their display cases, but I knew that looks were deceiving. The last time I'd had a job here, I'd spent a couple of days playing tourist, and I'd noticed two separate layers of security.

The first, the most obvious—the small statues of spiders that dotted the walls of the chamber. More than decorative, each was paired with another statue on the opposite side of the room, and breaking that connection by, say, walking in front of it, would animate them, at which point they'd do their level best to restrain the intruder until the guards could deal with them.

The second was less spectacular but just as effective. Every third paving stone was safe. Each of the other two were attached to magical triggers. Stepping on them would slam the doors of the room shut,

trapping the intruder inside. Didn't mean you couldn't get out another way, but it was likely to be a lot harder—and a lot more painful. I knew that one from experience.

We picked our way across the massive hall, Irian following exactly in my steps. I was counting on them not having changed the order of the statues since I'd been here last.

We made it to the display cases without incident. My bet had paid off. In front of us, three display cases, each intended to contain its own Chantry artifact. The center case where Dumat's Folly had, until recently, sat was empty. The glass in its display case was missing.

I took the rune from my satchel and held it against the dais, channeling as small a flow of magic as I could manage. The rune flickered briefly, glowing red. So, whatever had been there had, in fact, been Dumat's Folly. I had to be sure—the Chantry wasn't above replacing real artifacts with fake ones, while the real one sat in some vault.

I looked around. There were a half-dozen doors scattered around the room. Each was locked at this time of night, warded so even if you brought a lockpick, you'd have sentries on you in minutes. The window above the servants' entrance we'd used was another possibility—but on our way up the outside of the building, I'd looked for marks, signs of anyone else using our same path, and found none. And the doors were locked at all times, so that ruled them out. I frowned.

My last job here had fallen apart for exactly that reason—there was only really one way in or out. And I knew from bitter, painful experience that going out through the window was almost impossible, just because of where it sat. You needed both arms and both legs, and a whole lot of luck. The latter had been lacking for me, and it was why I'd barely escaped with my freedom, never mind what I'd come to steal.

"Look," Irian urged, pointing at the ground. I squinted—her eyes were better than mine—and saw what she had noticed. Blood left a trail, spattered on the stone—but it suddenly, abruptly, disappeared. Right beneath the display case that had contained the artifact.

The otherwise parallel lines of the stone floor were slightly askew. And—I leaned down—sure enough, the thin line of dust traced a complete square into the ground. So. I knew how they'd gotten in and out.

But something felt off. The magic countermeasures were everywhere, and the work of hundreds of years. I had a hard time believing that someone had just dug their way in and not set off any of them. It seemed too obvious.

I pulled a small crystal from my satchel and, holding it in front of me, snapped it in half. Magical dust flurried out. It would adhere to stronger magic, showing the lines of any enchantments, active or otherwise. A moment passed, a second, and then the dust traced out lines of magic on the display case.

It was subtle—far more so than the magic in the rest of the hall. A glimmering web of lines traced across the bottom of each case, marking the outline of the objects within. Incredibly delicate work—a lot more than I could manage. It was tied into the objects in the cases—if one removed the object, or even moved it, the flow of magic would break. I didn't know what would happen then, but I had to assume it was bad.

But where Dumat's Folly had sat, the magic simply stopped . . . No, not completely. The faintest flicker of it still stayed there. Had it been missing, I would've guessed they'd just removed the enchantment until the object had been returned. But it was almost as if it were being blocked—just imperfectly

It didn't make sense. What made that one case special? I needed to trace the magic back to its source—see where it had been severed. I knelt, my knee screaming with agony. I ignored it.

Beneath the cases, I found what I was looking for. Where the lines from each case gathered, they formed a thick trunk of magical energy that disappeared underground. But something was keeping that energy from reaching the case that contained Dumat's Folly.

I closed my eyes and reached out with my senses, letting my own questing energy flow over the space. *There*. Right where the magic branched, an enchantment instead diverted the energy back into itself.

It didn't make sense. The opening in the stone was brute work. The magic at the base of the dais was fine—finer than anything I could do, at least. Maybe they'd brought along a mage?

No—anyone who could manage that sort of magic wouldn't need to dig a hole. Or if they did, they would've sealed it up behind them.

I remembered what my client had said about the thieves having had help from inside the Chantry. Could be one of them, maybe? Corruption was far from unknown among the priesthood.

I looked at the enchantment again. There was something strange about it that itched in the back of my mind. I needed a closer look—but to do that, I would need to pull it apart. And once I did that, the magic would flow back into the dais, which would quickly discover that the Folly was missing. At which point, I imagined the whole building would know we were there.

There wasn't much else I could do, though. We'd have to work quickly.

"Be ready," I whispered to Irian. She nodded.

With a gesture, I started to pull the spell apart, releasing the stored energy. Just as the spell dissipated, I knew what was bothering me.

The magic was weeks old—the pattern of dust on the floor, where the stone had been cut, had been there only a couple of days. It was possible that someone had come in before the theft, but it seemed almost as though there'd been two robberies—weeks apart. But why?

I was out of time. There was a loud screech, and suddenly, the sound of alarms. The doors around the chamber slammed shut.

Well. Guess we knew what that magic did.

I could hear distant shouting. One of the doors started to open. I focused my energy and hit it with a wave of heat, melting it into the stone. The door screeched to a halt. The sound of footsteps retreated. I figured we had a minute, maybe two, before they either blew the door open or found another way in.

We had a decision to make. Either stay here and deal with the Archon's guards, or go down into that darkness and take our chances. I swallowed. I didn't like underground, but I had the feeling I'd like sitting in a jail cell even less.

With a grunt of effort, I cast a simple spell—one I'd used a thousand times, just not on this scale—and lifted the square that had been cut out of the floor, stone grating on stone. I gave Irian a look and nodded toward the now-open hole. She caught on immediately, wasting no time, slipping through the opening and into the waiting shadows below. A splash.

I looked in, took a deep breath, and leapt in, releasing the enchantment as I fell. Above me, the stone dropped into place with a deafening thud, cutting off the light, and dust showered down on me as I fell.

* * *

The mud at the bottom of the hole was thick enough, deep enough, that I landed with a soft, squishy sound, instead of the bone-cracking force I'd been bracing for. I sat up, spitting out a mouthful of warm, damp soil, wiping mud away from my eyes until I could see again.

"Well, that was fun." I grumbled, rubbing my ankle. Gingerly, I tested it. A little pain. Not enough to keep me from walking, though I probably wouldn't be climbing through many windows for a while. Above, small pieces of debris continued to rain down, shaken loose from the titanic impact. I stood up and took stock. I was covered with mud, every inch of me caked with it. Using my staff as a prop, I got to my feet. Immediately I sunk to the tops of my boots. *Fantastic.* I took a step, and another. Not too bad. I took a third step and my left boot stuck in the mud, my foot sliding out.

The boot vanished with a wet *slurp*. Great. I took another step and my foot came out of my other boot, which promptly vanished, too. Even better.

Ahead of me, coming back down the tunnel, Irian walked lightly, her outfit almost impeccable, her boots barely sinking into the thick sludge. I sighed.

"Footprints. A little way down the tunnel." She looked me up and down, her mouth quirking slightly into a smile as she noted my stockinged feet. I glowered at her, daring her to say something, but she only raised an eyebrow and then turned. I could see her shoulders shaking, though.

Everyone thinks they're a lot funnier than they are.

A hundred or so feet down the tunnel, the footprints disappeared. A couple of hundred feet farther in, the tunnel split. To the left, it continued as before, thick with mud, while straight ahead, the mud turned to dry stone. I gave Irian a look and pulled out a coin.

"Flip for it?" She gave me an arch look.

"I'll take this one." She looked down the side tunnel and her mouth twitched again, fighting a smile. "Don't want to get my boots dirty."

I sighed and shook my head, resigning myself to my muddy fate.

The tunnel grew smaller, narrower, and before long it was too low to walk through. I'd need to crawl. I got down on my knees and continued forward, squelching all the way.

A hundred more feet, and I found it. Half buried in the mud, a rough-spun hessian bag. Inside, a half dozen heavy mining picks. And a note, carefully wrapped to protect it from the elements. I opened it as carefully as I could. Difficult, with me covered in mud.

I recognized the language immediately. Qunari. That complicated things. But I couldn't make heads or tails of it—not even a few words here or there. *Damn*. Maybe Irian would have better luck—she'd always had a better eye for this kind of thing. And there was something else on the note. Blood. Whoever'd hurt themselves upstairs could have been the ones who handled the note.

It wasn't much to go on, but it was a whole lot more than what we'd had before. I rolled the note back up, tightly, so that it'd survive the journey back through the tunnel.

Crawling back, I emerged to find Irian waiting impatiently. She saw me and reached out a hand, helping me to my feet.

"Anything?" she asked, absentmindedly wiping her hands on her pants. Wordlessly, I handed her the note. She unrolled it and stared at it for a moment, frowning in concentration.

"Can you read it?" I asked, a little impatiently. The mud was starting to dry out, harden, and I just wanted to get out of there and clean myself up. She nodded.

"Yes." She met my gaze and shrugged. "They tried to recruit me a while back. Promised me a life of glorious freedom under the Qun. I went to one of their training camps. Didn't stick." I raised an eyebrow at that, but she continued, "It's orders—well, instructions. Ben-Hassrath. Locations and names are in code, but it's telling them to get the item and return home. Not to be seen either."

I frowned. So far, the Ben-Hassrath had more or less stayed out of the war. Which was strange—I'd always pictured the Qunari as more of a single mind. But while the military Antaam had seemed eager to fight, ready to avenge centuries-old wrongs, the Ben-Hassrath had sat it out. Stayed to the sidelines, avoiding direct confrontation wherever possible.

This whole thing seemed to suggest that they had maybe reconsidered that position.

"I've found something, too. It was shoved underneath some bricks, at the end of the tunnel." From her own satchel she pulled out a leather-wrapped package. "You're not going to believe this."

I took the package and frowned. It was remarkably heavy. And large. I pulled at the strings, undoing them, and unwrapped the leather. I gasped. Couldn't help it.

It was Dumat's Folly. I looked at Irian, my eyes wide. She shook her head.

"I don't know what the hell's going on. Maybe we're just lucky?" She snorted.

I reached into my satchel, pulled out the rune. Placed it against the artifact and channeled energy. Nothing. The rune remained dark, the artifact as well. I wrapped it back up again.

"It's a fake." It didn't make any sense.

"The hell does that mean?" There was a note of confusion in her voice. Not that I blamed her.

"One of two things, I'm guessing. First off, there were two robberies. Either the first robber stole the real Folly, and the Chantry replaced it with a fake, which the Qunari found and then subsequently discarded—"

She shook her head. "No. The way it was sitting, it's been there for a few weeks, at least."

That made even less sense. But I pressed on.

"Or the first robber stole a fake, and the Chantry replaced it with the real one. 'Least until they could make another convincing fake." I nodded at the leather-wrapped package in my hands. "Probably figured it out once they were away."

"Which means . . ." Irian started.

I nodded. "The Qunari have the real one."

The whole thing had gotten a lot more complicated. But at least we had an idea where we needed to go. Once we got there—once we got the artifact back—we could figure out the rest. I placed the package in my satchel. Still might be useful.

"So, where do we go from here?" she asked. It was a good question.

"First, we do something with this fake. Put it someplace safe. We can't find the real one, maybe the client won't know the difference?" I doubted it. She'd given me the rune, after all. Still, I felt better having it as an insurance policy. "And then? We go after the Qunari." I held up the note I'd retrieved. "Any idea what they mean by *home*?" I asked. Already knowing the answer—no way it'd be that easy. Of course not.

"It's in code. I could probably break it eventually, but . . ." She shrugged. "It'd take a while. Longer than I imagine we have."

I sighed. A dead end. *Dammit*. I didn't want to return the money, but I didn't see any other way. Visions of losing our home, of being kicked out onto the streets, danced through my head.

No. I had to think. There had to be something we could do. I frowned, chewing my lip. *Come on*.

The blood. Of course.

"Let me see that note." She handed it to me wordlessly. I took a deep breath, focused my energy. Hoped there was enough blood—now *that* was a phrase that felt authentically Tevinter. I let the energy flow through my staff, into the letter, into the blood.

I let my mind go blank. Several minutes went by, and I was beginning to think that the blood was too old, to dry, to work, when I got it. Flashes of images—a dock, a twin lighthouse. The smell of salt in the air, the feeling of spray on the skin. A flag I didn't recognize. Impressions. And then they disappeared. I took a deep breath.

"Well?" asked Irian. I described what I'd seen to her. She listened carefully. When I'd finished, she sighed and shook her head.

"Recognize any of it?" I asked. She nodded. "Well?"

"I know where they are. And I know that you're not going to like it."

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I shrunk back against the wall, making myself as inconspicuous as possible as, in front of me, guards marched by in formation. I'd dressed nondescriptly, a rough-spun brown tunic over a top of gray pants and scuffed leather boots, but I still felt like I stood out. Like they could tell I was Tevinter by some indescribable quality I possessed. I wondered if I smelled like Minrathous.

Kont-aar was fairly low on my list of places I wanted to go. It wasn't the weather—which was warm. Or the scenery—which was pleasant. It wasn't even that it was part of Rivain, which had a less-than-cordial relationship with Tevinter. It was that, as a town, they'd decided that the Qun made sense, and so they'd all converted. And the Qunari liked Tevinter less than most.

There was a tap on my shoulder. I nearly screamed but bit down on my tongue. Not a great way to keep hidden. I turned around, working under the assumption that if this were the Qunari here to take me away, they wouldn't have warned me.

It was only Irian, her expression tinged with faint amusement. She'd changed clothes—now she wore the brown leathers of the other elves we'd seen around town, those who'd pledged allegiance to the Qun.

"Find anything out?" I asked, my heart racing. She nodded.

We'd tracked the thieves to the ship in front of us. It hadn't been hard. Well, not hard for her. No one had wanted to talk to me—I'd covered my Tevinter accent with a Ferelden one that Irian claimed made me sound like a dying frog.

But they'd spoken to her easily enough. Once she'd spread a little coin around, at least.

No one had said, "The Ben-Hassrath are over on dock seventeen," of course, but you could tell a lot by what they *weren't* saying. Reading the words in the silences was something you learned early on in Tevinter. We were a passive-aggressive nation.

Everyone had gone to great lengths not to mention dock seventeen. Great and obvious lengths. Nothing else in town got that same sort of treatment, but whenever the conversation turned to the waterfront, no one spoke of dock seventeen. Whoever had taught them to be careful hadn't done a great job. I didn't plan to correct that training.

After that, it hadn't been too difficult to find the dock. Going with the theme of the day, it was, of course, isolated, almost impossible to keep an eye on. At least, if you were me. Irian had an easier time of it. She blended in with the other elves, their serious and grim demeanor coming easily to her, so she'd gone off to scout ahead while I loitered, trying not to draw too much attention to myself.

Irian sat down beside me. "They've been taking on supplies. Food to last a lengthy journey. Barrels of food—salted pork and smoked fish. More freshwater, gaatlok, that sort of thing. Sounds as though they're planning on leaving port within the day." *Damn*. That wasn't good. That I'd been able to track them to Kont-aar was a small miracle. No chance I'd be able to do track them again.

We needed to act right away. Which meant one of two things. Either a frontal assault—and I *really* didn't want to do that. Or stealth. That seemed like the safer option, but there was only one way in and out of a Qunari ship. And while Irian might be able to pass for a local, I felt like I probably couldn't.

"So what's the plan?" I asked. She looked me up and down critically and then gave me a smile. I didn't like that smile.

"How do you feel about salted pork?"

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I'd never thought of myself as claustrophobic. Of course, that was easier to say when I wasn't packed in a barrel, surrounded on all sides by salted pork. Not to mention how much I'd needed to contort just to fit in there.

I quite liked the taste of salted pork. Or at least, I did. I was pretty sure that I'd never be able to look at it again. The smell filled my world, and I only hoped that the air holes cut in the barrel would be enough. I didn't want to die with pork as my last memory.

There was a jostling movement, a heavy thud, and I felt the pork move around me. I was being carried. I could hear the faint murmur of conversation, muffled by the wood of the barrel and the thick slabs of meat.

We'd counted about three hundred paces from where they kept their supplies to the ship itself, and I counted them in my head. Waiting for a barked command, for the thud as my barrel was dropped, pried open. But it didn't come. I could hear the guard at the boat exchange pleasantries with whoever was carrying me, and then we were up a ramp, down a set of stairs.

The barrel was placed, carefully, on the ground, and the sound of footsteps receded. I waited. A hundred count. Two hundred. I was levering open the top of the barrel when I heard voices. *Shit*. I hunkered back down. Hoped no one would investigate my barrel too closely.

The voices nearby were muffled, but the words were clear enough.

"Did anyone get a good look at the two of them?" A male voice. It sounded elven.

"No, sir." Female. A little deeper. Qunari, maybe.

"Take half the guards. Sweep the taverns and the docks. Find them. They must be here for the artifact. And if they are, chances are they're working for him. We cannot risk them making their way onto the ship." I had an idea as to who he meant by *them*. Not sure who he meant by *him*, though. But it seemed we'd made our move just in time.

"Yes, Gatt."

One set of footsteps. Heavy, booted. They receded. Several moments passed. The other voice, the male, sighed, and then a second set of footsteps receded. The heavy thud of the door swinging shut. I gave it

another minute, and then emerged, brushing salted pork bits out of my hair, off my cloak.

I was in the hold. It was filled with shelves. They stretched into the distance, forming corridors, small rooms. Each was stacked high with boxes, Qunari writing on the outside.

I opened one at random. A magical artifact—not the one I was looking for, though. Examination of a couple more turned up the same thing. And inside each crate, written notes. So more than just stockpiling—they were studying them. I shook my head. This wasn't getting me anywhere.

The door opened, and I tensed. Nowhere to hide. But it was only Irian. Still wearing the Qunari leathers from earlier, she'd made it on to the dreadnought herself. But there was a notable absence of salted pork odor. She looked at me. I glared at her, daring her to say something. She just smiled.

I gestured at the room, at the shelves of crates that seemed to stretch on forever. "I don't know how we're going to find Dumat's Folly in all of this."

"We need to split up. You take north, I'll take south," she said, already opening crates. She was right. We needed to spread out our efforts. Hope one of us got lucky.

"Fine. Warn me if you hear them, though?"

She nodded.

"Will do. And I promised I won't get . . . boared." She kept the laughter out of her voice, but it was a close thing, and I could tell she was struggling. *No respect*.

I moved down the shelves to where they formed another large alcove. The task in front of us was enormous. And I doubted we had much time before someone else came down here. I sighed.

Think. I looked around the room, back at the makeshift hallway where the shelves stretched farther back into the ship. Boot prints—but none as fresh as those in here. I had to guess they'd packed the ship from the outside in. So whatever they'd packed last was most likely to be close to the entrance.

There was a thin layer of dust on several of the crates. I ruled those out—the Folly wouldn't have been on the ship for more than a couple of days. Not long enough to get dusty. That left six. The first four were more dead ends. But the fifth . . .

I opened the crate. Dumat's Folly. I smiled. *All right*. I reached into my satchel and pulled out the rune that my client had given me. I wanted to make sure the artifact was the real thing before I took it back—not that I had any reason to believe otherwise, but I'd promised my client I'd verify first. I moved the rune toward the object and it started to vibrate, to glow.

I hesitated. Something was wrong. The rune was thrumming with energy—and I could feel the artifact reacting to it. But the magic was wild, and what's more—I could feel it growing. It was hungry. I started to turn, to find Irian.

"Well done."

The voice came from behind me. Magic was already flooding through me as I tried to create a defense. Too late. Energy enveloped me, and I felt my muscles spasm. My staff clattered to the ground and I fell sideways, stunned, my head bouncing off the floor hard enough to send stars dancing across my vision.

She emerged from deeper into the ship. A lone elf. My client. She'd traded her thick winter clothing for a simple robe, embroidered with an unknown symbol, her hair brushed back, away from her pointed ears.

She strode toward me, calmly, unhurrying. Not that she needed to hurry. I couldn't move a muscle. A paralysis spell, and a pretty strong one at that. She knelt beside me and gave me a look that mixed pity with contempt. She reached down, pried my fingers open.

The rune that she'd given me—she held it aloft, examining it critically. Muttered a single word over and over again: "Felassan, Felassan, Felassan." There was a hum, and the rune began to glow a steady and unpleasant red. I'd been around enough magic to know that was probably not a good thing.

"I hired you for a reason. I am glad that my trust was not misplaced. You did well, for a *shem*." The last word was tinged with something close to disgust. I couldn't move my mouth to scowl, so I had to settle for thinking some very unflattering thoughts.

"Who put you up to this?" I asked. Or tried to. My mouth still wasn't working properly—the paralysis had affected my whole body, so it came out as "Oo hoot hoo hup ho his?" She smirked. Guess she'd understood well enough.

"I act freely. For the Dread Wolf. To bring back what was once ours—what must be ours again." *Dread Wolf. Crap*. I'd heard the rumors, of

course—dozens of elves, off to heed the call of some god. Guess I'd found one of them, at least. "The Qunari left sooner than I'd expected—their trail grew cold. But I had you. You found them for me. Found the weapon. I knew you would. Now see what you have helped me accomplish."

"And the real Dumat's Folly?" I could move my lips now, but the words were still hard to form. She looked at me, her expression cold.

"Back in Minrathous. Or it was. I had no need for it. Once I took it from the palace, I buried it." So what we'd found in the city was the real thing. Replaced with something else—which the Qunari had then stolen. But why go to all that trouble to have them take it?

I got my answer. She held the rune up, pressed it against Dumat's Folly. The two seemed to melt together, the rune becoming a part of the artifact. It began to glow, pulsing rhythmically. A little bit brighter each time. The air started to grow warm. I didn't know what it meant, but probably something bad.

And something else. Energy streamed to the device from each crate I'd opened. From the ground, a magic dagger I'd dropped in my hurried search glowed, a line of energy connecting it to the artifact—and then it crumbled, the dagger turning to dust in front of my eyes. That also seemed bad.

"It is an ingenious device. Not a piece of the Black City, like the true Dumat's Folly, but taken from the same time. It draws magic into itself. Stores it, and then when it is full . . ." She clasped her hands together and then pulled them apart. The universal sign for something exploding. Yeah. Not good.

"And now . . ." She sighed. "I am afraid that this really is the end. You are resourceful. I doubt you could do much now, but just in case." She drew a small crystal from her robe. It started to crackle with energy, and she pointed it at me. "Take comfort that in your sacrifice, the glory of the true people will be restored."

There was a *crack*, the thud of flesh on flesh, and she fell to the ground. Behind her stood Irian, rubbing her fist. She stepped around the crumpled form and knelt beside me, helping me up. The feeling was returning to my limbs now, and I was able to stagger to my feet, stiff-legged and sore.

"About time." Or close enough. My mouth still wasn't fully recovered from the paralysis.

"Sorry. I didn't hear her immediately, and then when I did, I figured I should wait for an opening." She shook her head. "Each one of those damned Fen'Harel cultists. 'Ooh, if we blow up enough people, ancient Elvhenan is *definitely* coming back.'" She caught my questioning glance. "They tried to recruit me a few years ago. I said no."

"Is there anyone out there that hasn't tried to recruit you?" I asked. She shrugged in response. I felt like that was answer enough.

There was a groan from behind us. The other elf, regaining consciousness. I growled in the back of my throat, stalked over to where she lay. Grabbed her by the front of her robe, lifting her into the air. She blinked her eyes slowly, and then they focused on me. Realization, followed by hatred. I didn't care. The feeling was mutual.

"You. You're going to help us. And if you don't . . ." I snarled.

Her teeth clenched. Green foam started to fill her mouth. I dropped her to the ground and she started spasming, her legs drumming on the wooden deck. Her back arched once, twice, and then she was still. I knelt beside her and put my fingers to the side of her throat. Nothing. Dead. *Dammit*.

"And that's the other reason I didn't join. *Death before capture*. Not my sort of thing at all." Irian shook her head. Looked up at the device. It was starting to get very warm.

"Can you disable the device?" Irian's voice was steady, calm. I shook my head.

"No. Can't get close enough." I picked up a piece of wood from the floor and threw it toward the object. There was a flash and it disintegrated. "Too much energy buildup."

She met my gaze, her eyes steady. "So that's it, then." She sighed. "I guess it's a bad time to say I was right about this job?"

I chuckled. Couldn't help it. "No. Can't think of a better time."

She rested her head on my shoulder. I embraced her, and she leaned into me.

"Thousands of people." The words were little more than a whisper. "A whole town, gone. Because of us."

She was right. If I hadn't taken the job. If I hadn't found the note, found the blood. If I hadn't tracked the artifact to Kont-aar. To this ship

—

I paused. *Ship*. We were on a ship. I laughed, and Irian looked at me as if I'd gone crazy.

"Come on!" I shouted, and ran out the door toward the deck above.

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I emerged into the sunlight, blinking. The day was beautiful and warm. The deck was empty. The sails sat limply, the wind little more than a breeze. Not great—it was going to make this whole thing a lot harder—but it wasn't the end of the world either. I had other ways to make the ship move.

Beside me, behind me, Irian emerged at a run. I pointed at the sails.

"Can you rig them?" I asked. She nodded, moving past me without stopping. Good. I didn't need to explain my plan.

The deck was strangely silent. The first lucky break of the day—we'd come during shift change. Or they didn't think anyone would be dumb enough to try and steal a Qunari dreadnought. Showed what they knew.

We worked quickly. I raised the anchor and Irian rigged the ship to leave the harbor. Dock seventeen's isolation worked to our benefit, as no one questioned why a human and an elf were readying a Qunari dreadnought for travel. Through it all, we were keenly aware of the growing hum as beneath us, Dumat's Folly prepared its final act.

Finally, we were ready. I took a deep breath and let my magic fill me. Irian went belowdecks, ensuring that we were, in fact, alone on the vessel. No sense getting this far and then catching a spear in the gut.

I channeled all my anger, my guilt, my refusal to lay down and die, through me, through my staff, and into the air. The sails fluttered gently, settled, and then filled. With a jerk, the ship began to move, spurred on by the magical wind. I laughed. I couldn't help it. It was working.

An arrow flashed past me, thudding into the mast in front of me. I lost focus. The gale turned into a breeze, the boat slowing down. Stopping. I turned to see five elves, wearing Qunari armor. As I watched, a sixth climbed over the edge. *Shit*. I guess someone *had* been paying attention. Five of them wielded javelins. The one who'd fired the arrow nocked another, aimed it directly at me. I raised my hands.

The haft of a spear cracked him on the side of the head. He tumbled to the ground. On either side of him, the other five turned. Irian. She stood behind them, soaked through from the sea, a smirk on her lips. I knew that expression. She settled into a combat stance and raised a hand. Beckoned the Qunari.

Two of them leapt forward, one going high while the other went low. She batted away one strike, leapt over the other, and drove a knee into a gut. The guard collapsed. A third one stabbed his spear down, trying to catch her on the tip, but she grabbed the haft and used her momentum to swing up, her booted feet coming up and into her opponent's nose. There was a *crack*, audible across the ship, and a spray of blood as he stumbled backward. Down.

The first guard she'd dodged had drawn a pair of daggers and stabbed at her unprotected back. But she'd anticipated the move. With a grace and agility that reminded me I was lucky to have won even a tenth of our sparring matches, she leapt straight up, catching hold of the trailing lines of the sail, and tucked her knees beneath her, the weapons scything by just below her. She dropped down on top of the other elf's shoulders, and with a twisting motion of her hips sent him flying toward the deck, where he impacted with a *crunch*, his daggers clattering to the deck.

The other two guards were more cautious. They had their spears out, pointed directly at her, circling her. She was slowly backing away, but she was running out of deck. They had her cornered. One jabbed his spear at her and she caught the blow on the haft of her own spear, but it broke in half. A second guard swiped at her, and the blade caught her on the arm, drawing blood. She hissed. The first one raised his weapon, ready to strike again. To finish it.

It was the opening I'd been waiting for. I channeled energy through my staff again. It reached out from its tip, into the skies. Lightning answered, and crashed down, into the tip of the javelin that the first guard carried. The blast sent him and his companion flying, tumbling across the deck, before they slammed up against the side.

I took a breath. Let it out. All six Qunari elves lay unconscious. Irian stood, already tearing cloth from her tunic to form a makeshift bandage for her wound.

"We can't leave them here." She was right. They'd done their job, nothing more. They didn't deserve to die for that. I looked around. There, bracketing the ship—two lifeboats. I looked her in the eyes, nodded at the closest one.

She got it immediately. We worked quickly, and soon, all six guards had been loaded in the lifeboat. But there was still one more person that needed to be there.

I pointed at Irian. At the lifeboat.

"You, too." My voice was shaky. "This is my mistake, Irian. You don't need to die for it."

She snorted.

"You and your martyr complex. Can you keep the wind up and steer the boat at the same time?"

"I just need to go straight. And out to sea as far as possible. I don't need to steer for that." We didn't have time for this argument.

"What happens if you catch a wave? Run into another ship? Or the wind—the real wind, I mean—picks up?" *Dammit*. She had a point. "You can't do this without me. We're a team, aren't we? Isn't that what you've always said?"

Using my own words against me. But she was right. I couldn't do it alone. Too many things could go wrong. I needed her help.

I started to speak, to thank her. She held up a hand.

"We can talk after." The cheer in her voice was forced. But I appreciated that she'd tried.

She ran past me toward the front of the ship, taking the steps up two at a time.

I settled onto the deck, cross-legged, my staff laying across my legs, and took a deep breath. Found my center, and began to pour energy through my staff, into the air. In front of me, Irian stood, her expression defiant, hands tight on the ship's wheel.

The wind picked up again, even heavier than before. The sails filled, and the ship flew forward. I was glad I was already sitting down—as it was, Irian barely kept her balance. We were off. Behind us, I was dimly aware of shouting, of the sound of horns. But it was too late. We were gone.

The air whipped by us. Irian kept the wheel steady, our course straight. Behind us, Kont-aar receded. The hum of magical energy was louder now, vibrating through the wood of the ship itself. Fatigue started to creep into my limbs—into my thoughts. I could feel the wind slackening. Released the enchantment. It'd have to do. I climbed to my feet, almost falling over. Irian came over, steadied me. I held her hand tightly. Didn't let go.

I looked back. We'd gone farther than I realized—a good four miles outside of Kont-aar. I didn't know if it was far enough. Not like we had a lot of choice. Below us, the thrum of magic had taken on a keening edge. Flames, edged with red, were licking at the deck now, centered on where

I knew the artifact sat. The heat was almost unbearable, the sound even more so. End game, then.

I pulled Irian close. She was crying—her tears mixing with the salt spray on my robe. I held her tightly, my own eyes watering. *Dammit*. It wasn't fair.

"I just wish—" I stopped. I didn't know what to say. Whatever it was, it would never be enough. Not even close. She looked up, met my gaze.

"I know," she said. She smiled, then, a real smile. "At least we get to do this together."

I looked around. I'd always expected to meet my end in some alley in Minrathous. Not on the deck of a Qunari dreadnought. My eyes fell on the lifeboat. Seemed cruel—no way we'd ever outrow the blast.

I looked at my staff. Looked at the lifeboat. *Oh, shit*.

"I'm not giving up yet," I muttered. I grabbed Irian's hand, pulled her with me toward the lifeboat.

She eyed it, her expression of despair unchanging. "We have minutes, maybe. We can't row fast enough to get to shore in time—not with only two of us at the oars."

I grinned. "Who said anything about rowing?" Held up my staff.

She got it. Shook her head, laughing. "You're crazy."

"Slim hope's better than none, right?"

I grabbed a coil of rope from the deck, heaved it on board, and started tying knots as quickly as I could. Irian frowned but took her cue from me. After a dozen heartbeats, I looked at our handiwork. A half-dozen lines were tied to the oar hooks, crisscrossing the boat. Had to hope it was enough.

We climbed in, and Irian cut the lines that held the lifeboat on the ship. It dropped twenty feet into the water, landing with a splash. I slipped the loose coils around myself and Irian, and we tied them tightly. As tightly as I dared—they needed enough give to keep us on the lifeboat without tearing us limb from limb.

I took a deep breath. Irian squeezed my hand, tightly. I squeezed back, let out the breath I'd been holding. Pointed my staff toward the stern of the lifeboat, toward the water. Had to hope this worked.

I drew in all the energy I had left, every scrap I could manage, channeling it through my body, through the staff. A cone of force erupted forth into the water, and the lifeboat rocketed forward with a jolt.

I was dimly aware of Irian laughing wildly as spray rocketed up in front of us, drenching us. I didn't look, didn't dare turn my attention from the magic in front of me. I fed every frustration, every emotion I could into the spell, and I could feel the boat skipping over the waves, moving faster than I would've ever expected. We bounced up once, twice, more times than I could count, but the ropes held, kept us from going overboard.

The dreadnought was receding, the reddish glow at its heart growing smaller and smaller. I risked a look behind me and realized we were almost at shore. I let the spell drop, let the energy fade out.

The lifeboat continued accelerating toward the shore. *Shit*. I tried to turn, to project the force in the other direction, to slow down, but the ropes—the same harness that had kept us from going overboard—now got in my way. The shore got closer. Irian started frantically cutting ropes, freeing us both, but it was too late. We sailed out of the water and up, over the beach.

I channeled the last of my strength into a shield, a sphere surrounding us both. Hoping it would be enough. I grabbed Irian and leapt, hugging her tightly to me, praying to any divine being that could hear me that it would be enough, that I hadn't just doomed us.

We slammed into the beach, sparks flying up where my shield hit the ground. The force of our impact sent sand flying up into the air, our sphere digging deep furrows. We bounced once, twice, jostling within the magical orb, but it still held. Finally, we slid to a stop. I waited a moment and then let the shield drop. I staggered to my feet, looked out at the water.

I thought I could see the dreadnought, the burning deck a distant speck on the horizon. A moment passed. Another. And suddenly, a flash of light, a second sun on the horizon. The Dumat's Folly. Every ounce of magic it could drain from the ship, released in a single, cataclysmic blast. And just behind the light, a shockwave. The waves rising, cresting.

The sound came next. It was the roar of a hundred dragons, the crash of a thousand avalanches. It filled the world and, dimly, I could hear glass shattering farther up the shore, in the town. And immediately behind it, a wall of water. We were hundreds of feet inland, close to the town, but it still drenched us, soaking us to the bone. I didn't care. I welcomed the cold. The cold meant we were alive.

I kissed Irian, deeply, and she returned it, leaned into it. I reveled in the feeling of her—of her warm, soft lips on my own, of the taste of salt. I pulled her tighter, closer. Living in the moment. The wind whipped at our hair, at our clothes, as the waves continued to crash just below us. Dimly, I heard the sound of shouting, of booted feet running.

Then the feeling of rough hands grabbing us by the shoulders. Hauling us to our feet, pulling us apart. They spun us around, surrounding us, marching us forward. Away from the false sun on the horizon, and toward town.

***

They brought us to a tavern. It was empty except for us, two guards, and a tall elf with dark hair, wearing the simple brown leather of the Qunari. He sat at a table, his expression unreadable. I returned the look and sat down across from him. Beside me, refusing to sit, Irian stood, arms crossed, her own expression remote.

"Tell me what you know." I recognized his voice—the one who'd been called Gatt. His tone was quiet, calm, but something else—urgency, maybe—colored his words. I leaned back. I was tired. More than tired, I was exhausted.

"That elf—she got to Dumat's Folly first. Hid it, replaced it with the weapon that destroyed your ship. Then you stole it. The weapon, I mean." I shrugged. "I'm guessing someone hired you to do it?"

"The Ben-Hassrath do not work for hire." He stated the words calmly, matter-of-factly. Then he sighed. "However, that is not to say that we cannot be persuaded in other ways. One of our agents spoke of Dumat's Folly. Suggested it was an artifact of great power and danger, integral to Fen'Harel's plans." He waved his hand irritably. "We captured him, planned to interrogate him, but he killed himself first, rather than be questioned."

"Lots of that going around," I muttered.

"Why bring it here, then?" Irian asked. A good question.

"The vessel it was on. It is—sorry, *was* called the Darvaarad. A Qunari word that means—'magical isolation' is the closest in your language. It was where we studied magical energies. To better understand you and your kind. Once it was a fortress, but its walls proved ineffective. This time, we felt it would be safer if it simply kept

moving, using speed and secrecy instead of fortifications." His voice turned wry. "Clearly, we were mistaken."

He leaned back. "The greater question, I think, is why hire you? Why not simply find the artifact herself?"

"Opportunity." I said the word slowly. Gatt looked at me curiously. "I don't doubt we helped her track you down, but that wasn't the real prize. Not for her. A Tevinter altus, striking at a Qunari settlement that had yet to enter hostilities? Ben-Hassrath wouldn't be able to sit the war out anymore. Hell, it might even bring Rivain in—and who knows who else. Utter and complete chaos." I felt nauseous. What I'd almost done, almost been responsible for.

He nodded. "There is little chance that we would not have struck back, and struck back hard. Any thought of peace would have vanished. Our people would have settled for nothing less than the total destruction of Tevinter."

I let my head fall into my hands. Irian had been right. I'd let my pride blind me—hadn't paused a moment to think about what I was doing. And it had almost cost me—cost the world—everything. The weight of my own foolish decisions was suffocating.

"But that's not what happened," Gatt said quietly. "You risked your lives. You saved Kont-aar—and more than that, you saved my people. You could have left my six to die, but you went out of your way to spare them."

I shrugged, embarrassed. "You would've done the same."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. But either way, just as it would have been hard to deny Tevinter's antagonism had the plan succeeded, it becomes equally difficult to deny that Tevinter saved us today." He smirked. "I can think of a half-dozen elves who will happily spread that tale."

I snorted. "Hate to break it to you, but most of my people still want to see you dead. A Qunari is a Qunari is a Qunari."

"A truth with us, as well, I'm afraid. The Antaam will still agitate for us to move against you more openly. But we can blunt their strike. The Ben-Hassrath will remain officially neutral. More important, free to act against the true threat. And with our allies standing next to us." The last was almost a question. He looked at me expectantly.

I hated to disappoint him. And the truth was, I was tempted. But I shook my head.

"Look. I'm happy I didn't start a war. Even happier that I didn't let some egomaniacal elf trick me into starting one. And I'd like to help . . . but right now, I just want to go home."

"You cannot." He held up a hand to forestall my explosion of anger. "I do not deny your wish. If you want to travel back to Minrathous, I will help you find passage. But you are now known to Fen'Harel. He has eyes everywhere. Inside Tevinter, without a doubt."

"So where should we go?" Irian asked quietly. She had moved closer, and was standing directly beside me. I put an arm around her waist, pulled her closer. She leaned her head on my shoulder. Gatt studied us for a moment, contemplating, and then spoke.

"You cannot stay with us. Nor, I imagine, would you want to. But we have other allies. A dwarf in Kirkwall. He will want to hear what you have to say about the enemy. And more than that, he will have work for you. Something more than survival—a chance to strike back. A chance to matter."

I thought about it. Thought about never going back to Minrathous. About spending the rest of my life on the run, waiting for a dagger in the back, an arrow in the night. I chuckled. It didn't sound much different from life in the Imperium, to be honest.

Besides. I looked up at Irian. She smiled at me. My home wasn't about things, or a place. It was wherever she was. That was the decision I'd made all those years ago, and it was one I had never regretted. Not for a minute.

I sighed. Reached out my hand. Gatt took it, and we shook.

But there was still unfinished business.

"We'll go to Kirkwall. Eventually." I looked at Irian again and my smile widened. "But first, any chance we can go to Val Royeaux?"

THE DREAD WOLF TAKE YOU

PATRICK WEEKES

The building sat hunched near the docks of Hunter Fell as though hoping not to be noticed. A hornless Qunari stood at the door, dressed in a dark samite suit and carrying a mahogany walking stick whose head was a dragon's skull carved from lazurite. The cut of his clothes and the scars on his hands sent a clear warning that sailors looking for a cheap drink should look elsewhere. A sign over the door had no picture but read, simply, THE TEAHOUSE.

Inside, the teahouse was dimly lit and conspicuously quiet. It was a place where a hood pulled up could hide a face, where whispers were worth more than gold. Candlelight flickered in smoked-glass lamps, shedding just enough light for a keen-eyed servant to find their way across the thick stained planks that lined the floor. There were no common tables, merely a bar and a number of wide booths, each blocked off from the room by heavy velvet curtains woven through with lyrium and enchanted to prevent any sound from escaping the booth.

The elf currently known as Charter nodded to the Qunari doorman as she stepped inside. He stared down at her, quick movements of his eyes showing that he saw at least some of the daggers hidden beneath her simple cloak and traveling clothes.

"I hope you are here for peaceful purposes," he said. His accent was almost gone, but she caught the traces of the old Qunari bleeding

through. A deserter, then, likely from when the Qunari had occupied part of Kirkwall years back.

"As do I," Charter said. The doorman narrowed his eyes slightly but made no move to take her weapons. The Teahouse was for the discreet, not the foolish, and it would be the height of foolishness to attend even a peaceful meeting without options if something went wrong. "I am meeting someone." She let a little bit of Kirkwall into her voice, and the doorman hid a tiny flinch. Definitely from the city's occupation, and the memories weren't pleasant.

"Sage is available at the bar to assist you in finding your party," the doorman said with a polite smile. "Have a pleasant evening."

Charter nodded to him and stepped inside. She paused to blink in the dim light and saw a servant, a middle-aged human woman in a gown of ring velvet so dark it seemed to eat what little light there was. The woman held a tray of drinks—one black tea, one herbal, one spiced wine—and she waited for a moment to see if Charter would pass.

Charter waved her forward, still blinking. Late or not, she would not move where she could not see. The servant nodded and stepped to one of the curtained booths, drawing it back. For a moment, sound came through, and she caught voices—one dwarven, with a Carta accent, and one that sounded Rivaini.

The doorman coughed politely behind her, and Charter nodded and made her way to the bar, aware of the eyes on her back. The man behind the bar, Sage, wore the same dark outfit as the doorman. He was a dwarf, and ancient from the look of it, skin like tanned leather pulled over bones tightly enough for the tendons to stand out on his forearms. A former dagger-man, Charter guessed. He smiled at Charter's approach, the wrinkles around his eyes folding like a collapsed Orlesian fan.

"How may we help you this evening, my dear?" he asked. His accent was Nevarran, his smile surprisingly genuine.

"I came to meet friends," she said. "Gauche, party of five."

"Of course. The upstairs room is reserved for you." Sage gestured to the glasses behind him. "The others have already arrived. May I take your order?"

She'd been on the road for a week and badly wanted a glass of wine, but she wanted a warm fireplace and a woman named Tessa in her arms, too, and neither of those would be good ideas right now either. "Anderfels mint, loose leaf, if you have any."

Sage nodded. "And do I recall correctly that it was two sugars?"

That had been ten years and several names ago. She smiled despite herself. "You do. Thank you."

Sage gestured to the staircase, which was lit more brightly—no one coming to a secret rendezvous wanted to make a bad impression by tripping on the stairs in the dark. She nodded and headed up, her footsteps quiet as she turned at the landing, then headed up farther.

The top floor was blocked by another of the black curtains that blocked the sound, and when she pushed it aside, she saw one large room. The lamps were dim and the walls bare of both windows and any painting where a peephole might have been concealed, but a fireplace against the wall crackled merrily, and seated around the fire in comfortable overstuffed chairs were four figures.

A dwarf, early middle age, his hair and beard black as the leather he wore, his boots and gloves stitched with lyrium runes, and the thin blade at his waist gleaming in its wyvern-hide scabbard. A big cup of coffee sat mostly empty before him, and his eyes were sharp as he watched her come in. The Carta Assassin.

A slender man wearing bright silks whose iridescent hues were complemented by an opal-inlaid full-face mask done to look like dragon's scales, with curly blond locks that hung about his shoulders. A teacup sat at the table in front of him, a few drops still left in the silver spoon resting on the saucer. The Orlesian Bard.

A pale woman in the dark robes of a Nevarran mage, frowning with evident disapproval, her staff sitting at rest by her chair but still crackling with faint magic around the amethyst crystal at the head, gripped by silver figures whose mouths hung open—in agony or ecstasy, Charter couldn't tell. She cradled a glass of mulled wine, while a silver stirring stick twirled in the glass of its own accord. The Mortalitasi.

A figure covered head to toe in dark robes of Vyrantium samite, with a thin mesh dropping down to cover the hood. The dark robes were trimmed in a pattern Charter had never seen, twisting shapes that curled to points in places that made her eyes hurt. A cup of what looked like dark red wine sat before the figure, untouched by leather-gloved hands, but she caught a faint whiff of the ocean from his robes, and something beyond the ocean. The Executor.

They all turned to look at her as she came in. She made no effort to hide her steps—stealth might be taken as rudeness—but the sound was

still muffled, and the floor felt slightly springy beneath her feet. A layer of cork under the floorboards for additional soundproofing, then.

"You're late," the Assassin snapped. "I've been stuck listening to the peacock and the death mage and . . . whatever he is." He gestured at the Executor.

"She is perfectly on time," the Mortalitasi said with a sniff.

"It is not as though you were enjoyable to talk to yourself, monsieur," the Bard said, his Orlesian accent curling like smoke around the words.

"Enough." The voice that came from the Executor could have been male or female, young or old. It was less a voice than the idea of a voice, rendered acceptably but no more. *"We came because we possess a shared interest in the Wolf."*

"The Inquisition's Wolf." The Assassin smirked. "Remember, he worked with them for a year with none of them the wiser. Imagine that, overlooking the god in your midst. How's that feel?" he asked, looking at Charter.

She allowed irritation to show with a little grimace as she sat down. Making the Carta agent feel like he had scored a point might get him to share more information of his own. "He is not a god, as he himself says. He is merely a very old, very powerful elven mage."

"Or *possiblement* a very *young* mage," the Bard suggested. "He could be a simple elf who stumbled onto old magic."

"Or he could be a demon impersonating an elf," the Mortalitasi said, sipping her wine.

"What he is does not concern us," the Executor said, the words neutral but carrying a weight that made the wine in its cup ripple. *"We across the ocean care only for his goals and means of accomplishing them."*

"According to what he told the Inquisitor," Charter said, shifting in her seat and noting with hidden pleasure how they paused at her words, "he wishes to restore the empire of the ancient elves, and he has made it clear that doing so will cause massive destruction to our world."

"Especially Tevinter," the Mortalitasi said with a sneer, "since most of it is built over where the ancient elves once lived." She looked around the room curiously. "You said that this would be a meeting of the best spies on the continent. Where *are* the Tevinter Siccari?"

"And the Ben-Hassrath," the Executor added. *"Do the Qunari fear to speak with us?"*

"Tevinter's intelligence network declined to answer our request," Charter said. "As did the Ben-Hassrath." She grimaced. "The latter is especially disappointing. They had more knowledge of Solas's movements than anyone else."

"They also tried to wipe out most of the southern governments in a surprise attack," the Assassin said, "and then invaded when that failed." He smiled tightly and took a sip of his coffee. "I'd be careful trusting anything they said."

Charter nodded as though the Carta dwarf had said something that wasn't obvious to everyone in the room, then let out a long breath. "Beyond that, the Inquisition knows little about what Solas intends. Much of his research involves the Veil that separates our world from the world of the spirits. He claimed to have created it, and he asked the Inquisition for help activating artifacts to strengthen the Veil. That seems a possible place to start."

It was weak, which Charter knew. She let that weakness creep into her voice as she said it, the little hitch of someone out of their depth.

The Executor was motionless, the Orlesian merely stirred his tea, and the Mortalitasi rolled her eyes.

But the Carta Assassin bit, as she'd hoped he would.

"I'm only here because Viscount Tethras called in a few favors," he said, smiling broadly, "but I didn't expect to be the best-informed person in the room. You don't even know what he wants, and I can tell you that!"

Charter sat back, clenching her teeth. The Assassin clearly enjoyed her frustration, and with a little push, he would tell her everything. "We know what he wants!" she said hotly. "He wishes to end—"

"Not his goal." The Assassin waved that away, then paused and finished his coffee. "His target. The Carta might not be much for magic, but pay attention, and you might learn a trick or two."

THE ASSASSIN'S TALE

So, red lyrium. At first we thought it was just a new ore of the stone— more magic per ounce, little more of a bite to it. When Bartrand went crazy after discovering red lyrium, we thought it was just, well, him

going crazy. Same for Meredith when she nearly destroyed Kirkwall. The templars are always two missed meals from madness. Take it from the folks who sell them their lyrium.

Then word got around. One of our best smiths has been studying red lyrium, and she says the blasted stuff is tainted by the Blight. A few families might've tried to keep smuggling it after that, but we shut that down.

The Carta believes in business. Blight is bad for business.

Another thing that's bad for business is competition, so when Viscount Tethras kept the quarantine in Kirkwall, where Meredith caused so much damage with her lyrium sword, and then turned into a blasted statue herself, the Carta approved. Anybody got ideas about sneaking in, breaking off a piece of old Merry the Mad for themselves, we showed them the error of their ways. You got it?

So when this Dalish elf comes around asking can someone get the lyrium idol out of what's left of the statue, our first thought was to send him back to his clan with a few new tattoos carved into his face, if you know what I mean.

Plus, the idol is gone. Everyone knows Merry the Mad forged that old idol into her sword, and then the sword exploded. But the elf keeps at it. He's learned it from a dream. Some old legend of his people says the idol is in her body, and if he gets it out, he can free his gods or something like that. Honestly, the elf gods always bored the crap out of me, no offense, Charter. At least the humans' Maker has the good sense to sod off and leave us alone.

We're about to kill him, not because we're cruel, you understand, but anybody who is that determined to dig around in a statue made of lyrium needs to be put down before they get a bunch of people hurt, and then the elf pulls out a potion and says it will soften the raw lyrium and weaken its magic for a bit, so we can get to the idol inside safely. We pour a little of that potion on some lyrium for a laugh, and damned if it doesn't work just like he says. Crazy or not, the elf knows something, and he promises us the statue's weight in gold, plus he'll teach us to make that potion, which is a very profitable possibility, so we decide that the safest thing for us to do is help the elf out so that he doesn't get hurt trying to do it himself.

None of this goes to your Divine Victoria, Charter. I don't even know how much of an Inquisition you still have these days, but this is sharing

in good faith, and if I get guards banging on my door about something that wasn't supposed to leave this room, the Carta will be *very* unhappy, you hear me?

Just making sure.

Anyway, we sneak into the quarantined square where Merry the Mad is keeping watch forever, climbing over the barriers they've set up quiet, and quick. It takes a little bribery and a little moving, quiet-like, and maybe a few of Kirkwall's finest should've taken the hint and gone for a walk, but they got a bad case of scruples and had to go for a swim instead, but what matters is we got to the statue. It was creepy, I'll tell you that. The whole square stank of magic, thick enough to raise the hair on your arms, and as we're moving through the shadows, I'd swear on my mother's urn I heard music in the wind, like some old song I heard as a kid but can't quite remember. A couple of us fell over right there, shaking and whispering, but most of us keep our heads on straight, and we get to the statue.

It doesn't really look human anymore. It doesn't look like much of anything, other than a twisted vein of lyrium that just grew out of the ground in a weird place. Some of the lyrium is dark. Some of it's glowing. The song in my head is getting louder, and another of my Carta brothers runs off screaming, the idiot. Me, I'm just glad the statue doesn't look much like Meredith anymore, because digging something out of a dead woman's chest isn't something decent people do.

Our alchemist uses the potion on old Merry the Mad, pouring it right on her heart, just like the elf had said, and old Merry opens up like a snowman with boiling water tossed on it, and damned if it isn't there in the middle of her chest, that little idol Bartrand brought back from the Deep Roads. It's not much to look at—a couple hugging, too thin to be dwarves—but it's sitting there, glowing softly like a ruby lit by the grace of the Maker himself. I've got the best gloves, genuine wyvern leather, and I reach in, scoop aside the raw lyrium like it was mud in a rainstorm, and pry out the idol.

It's heavier than you'd think—lyrium's heavier than you'd think, too, but this was heavy even for that. When I hefted it in my hand, it was like it wanted to keep moving, like it was liquid inside. I don't know. Anyway, we get it into the chest—double shielded, safe enough that you could sleep with it under your pillow at night—and the song shuts off all at once.

We get out of the square and back to our safe house, where the elf is waiting, but that's when trouble hits. After Kirkwall went boom, a lot of the templars went rogue. They kept buying lyrium from us, but they're all but bandits—tell you the truth, we kept them reined in by threatening not to supply them unless they kept trouble to a minimum. At our safe house, these former templars find us. One of the guards we bribed must've talked, I suppose, because they knew what we had, and they wanted it. A piece of old Merry the Mad to keep for themselves.

They have us outnumbered, on account of the men we lost to that song in our heads, so we go inside to "negotiate." The elf comes out and tries to fight, and they rough him up some, and he's on the ground sleeping with a lump on his head in short order.

The leader of the former templars says that he wants the potion that changes lyrium, and we can't give what we don't have, and he's not happy to see that the person who *does* know how to make that potion is lying out cold on the ground, so he ties up the elf and says that he'll wait. He takes the chest, and not long after, another man comes by. Tevinter, by his clothes, and I heard the templars say something about "House Qintara," and he gives them a big bag of gold and takes the idol.

Now the templars are waiting for the elf to wake up, and it's almost morning, so some of them go to sleep while the others keep watch. Some of my boys are doing the same, and the templar leader and I are sitting there drinking coffee trying to figure out how we're going to settle this without anybody else ending up dead.

That's when the sleepers start twitching. All of them, all at once, backs twisted like they're having a fit. With the templars, I'd think it's a bad dream, but it's happening to my boys, too, and you all know dwarves don't dream. Whatever it is, it has them shaking and seizing, and then it all goes still, and everyone who was asleep is dead with blood pouring from their ears, and let me tell you, templars don't like anything that looks like demons killing their boys *at all*, so the templar leader is up with his blade out, and I'm doing the same, because what kind of magic does he think the Carta uses, exactly, and also if it were us doing it, why would I kill my own?

That's when arrows come through the window and leave the templar pinned to the wall. Everyone who was awake was on their feet, and the arrows hit all of them except me, because I didn't get my job by not knowing when to dive for cover. The templars are down, my boys are

down, and I hear footsteps coming, so I make my way to the sleeping elf, because I figure he's tied to this somehow, and I'd dealt with him proper and honest, so maybe, if this is his people, he'll vouch for me.

He's already dead, bad luck for him—a stray arrow caught him in the throat. I smear his blood by my ears, and twist up on the floor in my best imitation of a corpse.

They come in a moment later—elves, but not any elves I've ever seen. No crap on their face like the Dalish, and they don't have that little hunch a city elf has, hoping you don't notice them. They've got fancy armor and bows out, and they case the room like professionals. One of them says that the idol must have been moved, and his accent is your normal Ferelden, not like the Dalish, who always sound like they're talking through a mouthful of toffee. He sees the dead elf on the ground and swears. Must've been embarrassed that his own arrow killed the boy he was supposed to rescue. The other one leans down by the body and says, "The Dread Wolf guide your soul to peace, brother," and his accent *does* sound Dalish, only more formal, like he's reading a poem even when he's not, and then the elves walk out of there without another word.

So that's what happened, my word to your Maker. The Dread Wolf wants that idol, and he's not afraid to get his hands bloody to get it. I pity House Qintara, if he ever finds them. And I hope none of them are deep sleepers.

***

The Assassin sat back as the thick black curtain parted, and everyone turned to watch the servant bring in Charter's tea. "Thank you," she said as the woman set the cup and saucer on the table.

"Will there be anything else?" the servant asked, looking around the room.

"No, *merci*."

"I'll have another Antivan." The Assassin held out his coffee cup, and the servant took it and left. When she was gone, the Assassin glared at the room. "Anyone else ready to share?"

A second cup of coffee, and a killer who came in dreams—or sleep, since dwarves did not dream. The Carta Assassin was afraid.

"Interesting to see both Dalish and city elves working with this . . . thing." The Mortalitasi grimaced, and then her eyes snapped down to her

stirring stick, still moving of its own accord in her wineglass. "I see specks at the bottom, wisp." Her voice held a warning, and the stirring stick jerked and moved faster.

"The templars," the Bard said. "How did they find your safe house, monsieur?"

The Assassin grimaced. "Guess it wasn't so safe after all. Haven't used it since, I'll tell you that for free."

"House Qintara fell with the city of Ventus," the Executor said, shifting under the cowled robe. *"The Qunari may possess the Wolf's idol."*

"I do not believe so." Charter smiled. "I had agents involved with House Qintara before it fell." Or more accurately, *while* it fell, but that was more information than the room needed. "The idol was sold or traded to the Danarius family."

"So you already knew that?" the Assassin asked, scowling.

"And now we know that the Dread Wolf has agents working for him," the Bard added, his mask glittering in the firelight as he tossed back his golden locks, "and that he has the power to kill those who oppose him as they sleep. Useful information." The hair toss was effective but a little clumsy. He normally styled his hair differently.

"And another point in favor of this so-called god being a demon," the Mortalitasi added.

"Or a poisoner. The Crows have odorless poisons heavier than the air. They steal the breath from sleepers while leaving those seated or standing unharmed."

"I know poisons," the Assassin growled, leaning forward and glaring at the cloaked Executor, "and I know magic, and I know which killed my boys."

"This does not help us eliminate the Wolf. You might as well suggest we throw a rock at him." The Executor turned, the featureless black underneath the hood suddenly looming as it centered on the Assassin. *"You stink of lies and fear."*

The Assassin leaned in, his blade already halfway from its sheath, and the Bard was suddenly between them, one hand raised before the Assassin, the other resting gently on the Executor's leather glove. "Please, *mes amis*. If we argue, none of us will learn what we came to find."

Charter gave the Bard credit—she wouldn't have touched the Executor herself unless she'd had a weapon drawn. But then, given the

reputation of the Orlesian bards, it was likely that he had a weapon closer than she thought. His hands were ungloved, his fingers long and pale. The flashy rings had no tan lines around them, so they were costuming, not normally part of his outfit.

"I believe the dwarf," the Mortalitasi said, "and I have information that supports it. I believe I know where the idol went after it left House Qintara. Stop."

The last was directed to her stirring stick, which abruptly went still in her cup. She removed it and gently eased it into a hidden pocket of her staff, just below the amethyst crystal gripped by the silver figures.

THE MORTALITASI'S TALE

In Tevinter, the mages made the greatest possible mistake. They chose to rule. In doing so, they shackled themselves to desks and appointments, using their waking hours to command men when they could have been commanding the magical forces that underlie the very fabric of this world.

In Nevarra, the king rules, and the common people are happy, or at least as happy as common people ever get. And the mages, the Mortalitasi? We rule the king. With a small investment of time, we command one man, and that man commands the others, and beyond that, we need not concern ourselves with them.

We perform rituals. The specifics need not concern you—only a mage would truly understand, and none of you are mages, unless the Executor wishes to correct me? Ah, so mysterious and silent. But the Mortalitasi know how to pry answers from silence.

Suffice it to say that we find places where the Veil is thin, and behind it, the Fade flows like a mighty river. In these places, our magic may bind spirits, as is only right and natural, and in so doing, guide the current of that river, so that it flows more to our liking.

It is *not* nonsense, dwarf. That your people are blind to magic does not remove its effect upon this world.

There are others among the Mortalitasi who do other work—the Guides of the Path to shepherd the corpses, the Mourn Watch to deal with magic gone awry—but those who do as I do, who bind the Fade

and the world beneath it to their will . . . we are the truest mages, whatever those who question our methods might say where they think we cannot hear.

It is in this understanding that we allowed a Tevinter mage to visit and perform a ritual. He came from House Danarius, saying that his master had met some misfortune. He asked for our help, that he might change this world for the better. The war against the Qunari, he said, had not gone well. You all know that the Antaam invaded without permission of the other branches of Qunari government? We had assumed this would hobble them, but it appears the priests and workers were a moderating influence. Without them, the Antaam have crushed the Tevinter opposition in the east. I fear everything east of Vyrantium will be under their control inside a year, and northern Antiva as well.

Can you imagine the Antaam in control of this land? They hate magic even more than the cowards in the south. Our great works, the magic of centuries? They would destroy it, judging us monsters, as though they had any right. It is unacceptable. I will not answer to witless fools who cannot even see the demons I bind by will alone.

I will not answer to you either, Orlesian. When you can stand in the Fade and turn the raw chaos to your own purpose through sheer force of will, then I will accept your opinions of whether my magic is safe or appropriate.

The mage who came to us had a way to drive back the Antaam: he would perform a ritual with our help, directing the course of the Fade against the Antaam, so that every dream, every demon, every half-interested spirit would urge them back to the north, away from humanity. Their resolve would weaken, their invasion would crumble, and all would go back to the way it should be.

It was a bold plan, unsubtle as Tevinter mages are wont to be, but attractive in its audacity. We brought him one of our ritual chambers, deep in the Grand Necropolis. Here, our greatest mages are preserved, their bodies now home to bound spirits who empower our rituals.

The Tevinter mage brought slaves with him, and we thought nothing of it. He also brought what he said was an ancient elven artifact, taken from House Danarius before it fell. When he opened the thick chest marked with the Carta's protective runes and drew it forth, we saw it clearly—an idol crafted from red lyrium, which seemed to show two

lovers, or a god mourning her sacrifice, depending upon how it caught your fancy.

It whispered in our minds when we saw it, but those of us gifted with magic hear such murmurs in our minds all the time, and it is nothing to us.

Our great cavern had been prepared. Arcane possessions ringed around us, corpses of our greatest mages bound in ritual circles that kept the demons inside their bodies safely leashed. We had all drunk lyrium until we could feel the magic pulse inside the ancient walls, a song whose notes were ours to play. We knew our parts, and I, as one of twelve Mortalitasi, brought forth my magic, enhanced it with the arcane possessions, and focused it upon the idol the Tevinter mage had placed upon the ground before him.

My part of the ritual was complex, and I was so focused upon it that I did not at first realize the Tevinter mage was killing his slaves. I saw them lying on the ground in a trance in a circle around him, and then he had cut the throat of one of them, and then another, catching the blood of his victims on the idol as he made his way around the circle.

I would of course have stopped him were it possible, but the ritual was already underway. To give up my bindings could have caused massive destruction, likely killing the slaves anyway. So it was that I could only continue my work and watch the distasteful business, wishing I could have stopped him.

When our power, plus the power of our arcane possessions, plus the power of his slaves' lives, had all come to him, the Tevinter mage raised the idol before him, and I saw a spike of lyrium spring from the base of the idol, so that all at once, it was not merely an idol, but a ritual blade. He slashed his own hand, and a wave of power pulsed through the cavern. It was as though we *were* the blood, and the cavern was the body through which it flowed, and we fell, all of us, to the ground, our minds pulled into the raw chaos of the Fade by the power of his ritual.

All around us was light and color, a dizzying array of the magic that makes up the world of spirits, and it swirled around the Tevinter mage and his ritual knife as though he were the eye of a hurricane. Something huge trembled around us—a spirit so great that it shook parts of the Fade I had always considered to be neutral, devoid of life—and high overhead, where the Black City shadowed the sky, I heard a great booming roar.

But before the Tevinter mage could complete his ritual, the Dread Wolf arrived.

It was no elf, no mortal mage. It was a beast unlike any I had ever seen. Lupine in appearance, but the size of a high dragon, with shaggy spiked hide and six burning eyes like a pride demon, and it came to us on wings of fire that resolved themselves into a horde of lesser demons as the Dread Wolf landed before us.

"*YOU MEDDLE PAST YOUR UNDERSTANDING, FOOLISH MORTAL MAGES, AND IN DOING SO, YOU THREATEN ALL CREATION.*"

The words battered us like storm winds, and the Dread Wolf's jaws closed upon the Tevinter mage, snapping him up in an instant as he screamed in terror. The lesser demons rushed down upon us, crackling with fire and lightning, and our ritual collapsed as we all drew upon our own magics to survive.

"*YOU USE MY IDOL CARELESSLY TO VANDALIZE THE SEA OF DREAMS. NOW FEEL THE PAIN OF WHAT YOU HAVE CREATED.*"

At once, we were awake, back in the cavern, and its walls shook and cracked, and then a rift of green light rent the ceiling open above us, and the demons that had accompanied the Dread Wolf burst into the world in righteous fury, shining warriors with blades forged from the raw Fade itself, and behind them, dimly visible through the crackling light, the shadow of the beast itself, from whose slavering jaws came the final words, roared not in anger, but with quiet contempt.

"*FROM THIS MOMENT, SHOULD YOU EVER BIND A SPIRIT, THEN YOUR LIFE IS MINE.*"

The hypocrisy almost made me laugh. The Dread Wolf forbade us from binding spirits, but why would these lesser demons attack us if not because the Dread Wolf bound them? They might have looked like spirits of Valor or Justice to the untrained eye, but I assure you, no kindly spirit would tear into us as these creatures did.

I flung my magic at them, driving them back with wards and blasts of raw power. My fellow Mortalitasi fell around me. The Tevinter mage lay on the cavern floor, a withered husk surrounded by the slaves he had sacrificed in his bloody ritual.

One of my fellow Mortalitasi, a noble's son, sprinted to the body. He seized the idol—its lyrium blade was gone, retracted or shattered, I know

not which—and flung it into the thick Carta chest that had bound its power before. He ran with it, leaving the rest of us to die, and I cursed his name and his cleverness.

The rift closed, and the demons laid the Mortalitasi to waste. I ran, with a few other survivors. I had to escape the demons, to warn the others, you see, so that they would not endanger anyone else. The demons blocked my path, as did the arcane possessions, the corpses of our great mages carrying powerful spirits.

There were only two of us left, me and an old acquaintance. She wept beside me, her staff broken and useless as her old arguments and petty politics. A demon caught her from behind, its shining blade piercing her heart with a single clean blow. Her life flowed out beside me, and I was helpless to save her.

Then the bodies of the sacrificed slaves twitched and shuddered as spirits found them, and a moment later they were on their feet, corpses driven by spirits, and they fell upon the demons and the arcane horrors, giving me time to flee.

The Mourn Watch, close-minded fools, questioned later why the corpses would aid me. As though my good works were insufficient to draw compassionate spirits who might wish me protected, as though I were some common criminal binding spirits through blood magic, not the victim of the Dread Wolf himself!

They returned with me nevertheless, ready to banish the demons, but they had already left. The arcane possessions had vacated their corpses as well, as had the sacrifices. We re-interred our honored dead and ended up sealing the cavern.

We searched for the noble's son and the stolen idol, but he had fled into Tevinter, and with so much of the Imperium in chaos from the war, it was not safe for us to give chase. I fear that is where my knowledge ends.

Whatever you know of this mage, put it aside. Whether he is truly the Dread Wolf of elven myth, I cannot say—it is not uncommon for powerful spirits to be worshipped as gods, as the Avvar do. But whatever fear the name of the Dread Wolf carries, he has earned. While we might visit the Fade, it is his natural home, and the spirits there serve him gladly. They whisper in my dreams now, accusing me of crimes I never committed and promising vengeance if my wards fail. A weaker mage would be dead already, or mad.

And as clear as the Dread Wolf's anger at what we had done—the Mortalitasi binding spirits he considered his own, the Tevinter mage using forbidden blood magic—was the feeling that we had disrupted his own work.

He intends something for the Fade, and if he wants the idol, then whatever he intends will be terrible.

***

The Assassin harrumphed as the curtain drew back, and Charter saw his hand go to his blade again, but it was only the servant returning with his coffee. He nodded at her, and she withdrew, the curtain crackling faintly with magic as it drew silence across the boundary at the top of the stairs.

"This is useless," he snapped, and sipped his coffee with a grimace. "I knew the elf was dangerous. Now he's a demon as well?"

"Or has an alliance with a demon," Charter pointed out. "During his attacks on the south, Corypheus allied himself with a fear demon as a way to trap the Grey Wardens."

"The Grey Wardens trapped themselves," the Bard murmured, a hint of disapproval in his voice as he stirred his tea. "Regardless, we know more than we did."

"He has begun whatever ritual he intends to use to restore the elven empire," Charter said, "and he is aware of disruptions. The ritual involves the Fade, and it requires the idol in some way."

"The idol also reacts to other lyrium," the Mortalitasi added, "Perhaps he needs lyrium for his ritual, the normal blue or this strange new red form."

The Assassin folded his arms and sat back. "We've enough problems without getting mixed up with red lyrium," he growled. "I told you, it's Blighted, and Blight is bad for business." He glared over at the Executor. "And you've been happy to listen, but haven't offered anything of your own. What are we getting in trade?"

Before the Executor could answer, the Bard raised his hands. "I believe I know where the mage carrying the lyrium idol went next. *S'il vous plaît*, allow me to continue its tale."

Charter nodded, and the Assassin harrumphed again and gulped his coffee. Taking that as permission, the Bard began.

THE BARD'S TALE

The war between Gaspard and Celene was a great disruption to my country, expensive both in lives lost and coin spent. Since its resolution, those in my profession have spent much of our time traveling abroad in search of Orlesian treasures sold or bartered.

Recently, I found myself asked to recover such a treasure, a ring that once belonged to Empress Celene herself, a gift from the previous Lady Mantillon before her untimely retirement. I had traced this ring across Thedas to the neutral city of Llomerryn, where I had heard rumors of an auction where enchanted treasures from across the world were to be sold.

I procured an invitation and arrived at a massive fortress guarded by a pair of massive golems, their stone marked with runes and crystal that glowed green as they examined my invitation. They waved me in, and I entered and made my way to the ballroom, where I found a crowd of the wealthy and influential gathered from all across Thedas.

An Avvar augur laughed loudly at a Rivaini pirate captain's dirty joke. A soberly clad noble from Starkhaven glared at an auburn-haired elf whose dagger-knot gave her away as an agent of the Qunari spies, the Ben-Hassrath. A Warden-Commander spoke with a woman who was robed and masked, but as I passed her, I recognized the voice of Divine Victoria herself.

All of them were watched by a figure who sat upon a chair large enough to be a throne, a withered unmoving figure I would have taken for a corpse despite its finery had it not occasionally spoken by means of some magical artifact to order a small boy to moisten its desiccated limbs.

My orders were to purchase the ring if possible, or, failing that, make contact with the buyer and facilitate an exchange by some other means. The auction would not begin for some hours, and I circled the floor, listening and making idle conversation.

I quickly learned that the auburn-haired elf was not the only Ben-Hassrath agent present. She was giving information to others, and out of curiosity at what the Qunari, so averse to magic, might want at an auction such as this, I listened. The words were in the Qunari language, which I know only triflingly, but I heard her mention the Siccari.

Curious, I followed the servant, a forgettable human man, as he left the elf.

He descended down a flight of stairs, and I followed, pretending to be lost in my cups. At the bottom of the stairs, the servant accosted me, a thin blade produced from his tunic, and I regrettably introduced him to my own blade, which was shorter than his but still long enough to reach his heart, and explored the lower floor.

It quickly became clear that the bottom floor of the castle was intended for servants, which made it surprising to see heavily armored guards stomping through the hallway, watching for intruders. I had understood that the treasures to be auctioned were upstairs in a great vault, but now began to suspect that something else had been kept down here for safety. I kept to the shadows and let the guards pass by, as my blade was not long enough to reach *their* hearts.

Finally, I found the other Ben-Hassrath, deep beneath the castle, in tunnels that the auctioneer himself probably did not know existed. I smelled salt air farther down and surmised that they led to a smuggler's cove, some hidden way into and out of the castle, but could not explore further, as the Qunari themselves were making preparations in my path.

These were not humans or elves who had foolishly given themselves to the Qunari cause. These were Qunari themselves, tall and gray-skinned, but lithe and fast where the Antaam soldiers are bulky and strong. They carried no lanterns or torches, but held instead a metal rod ending in a glass bulb inside which an eerie light burned more brightly than any candle. They carried blades and the thick, heavy satchels that Qunari use to store their explosive powder, and as I watched, they applied a pouch to a heavy iron door against the wall and stepped back.

They were waiting, and I wondered for what, and then I caught the strains of music from upstairs on the main floor. Musicians were entertaining the crowd, and I recognized the piece—as, apparently, did the Qunari. They nodded along with it, and just as the piece reached a loud moment fraught with crashing drums and blaring horns, the Qunari threw a small blade at the pouch.

The pouch exploded with a burst of fire, the force directed inward, and the door collapsed, blown from its hinges, with a great clatter. The Qunari looked around, waiting, and when they were satisfied that no one had heard the noise over the music up above, they went forward.

I followed after a few moments, and from my view in the shadows, I saw that they had entered a sort of ritual chamber. I marked it as elven in origin, with tall arches across the ceiling and one of the old elven mirrors on the wall, flanked by statues of halla and dragons.

In the middle of the room, sitting on a satin pillow that rested upon a stone pedestal wrought with protective runework, was the red lyrium idol.

Just as the Qunari entered the room, so did another group.

Three of them were human—two of them mages, both wearing what I recognized as the outfits of Tevinter magisters, though they had shed their masks and held their glowing staves with the subtle confidence of operatives rather than rulers. The other human held a bow, and the arrow she had nocked crackled with enchantments at the head. The last member of the Tevinter team was a golem—identical to the golems that had guarded the castle entrance as far as I could tell, save that it seemed to have intelligence in its eyes, and it stood ready to defend the humans.

For a moment, the two groups assessed one another. Then each group slowly spread out and readied their weapons.

"This is not some mere trinket," said a female Qunari who must have led the Ben-Hassrath. "It is being searched for by a dangerous mage who styles himself the Dread Wolf. He threatens both our people. Leave, and we will have no quarrel with you tonight."

"Why don't you leave?" asked one of the mages. "Or do you honestly think you know how to harness this idol's magic better than the mages of Tevinter? We know of the elven upstart. He is a mage named Solas, and his ritual has already started to affect the Fade. We cannot risk him acquiring this idol and finishing what he has begun."

"Neither can we," replied the Qunari.

They said more after this, but it was more of the same. They raised their weapons.

Then the eluvian, the elven mirror on the wall, sprang to life, and as both sides turned, a figure stepped out, an elf in golden armor with a wolf pelt across his shoulder.

He looked at them, and his face was empty of all expression.

As one, the Siccari and the Ben-Hassrath turned to flee, screaming in panic.

The elf's eyes blazed once with glowing light, and everyone stopped, petrified by strange and terrible magic. Even the golem was living stone

no more, its crystals dead and gray as it froze where it stood.

The elf walked unhurriedly to the pedestal. Slowly, he lifted the red lyrium idol from the pillow where it rested. He whispered something as he picked it up, tracing his gloved fingers gently along the crowned figure who comforted the other, but I could not make out the words, for I fear they were elven. Then he turned back to his mirror and stepped through its shimmering border. A moment later, it was dead and dark again.

That is all I know of the Dread Wolf, I am afraid. The idol's journey is now complete, and it has found its master. He will destroy anyone in his way without regret or hesitation, and whatever he intends, I do not believe we can stop it.

***

The Bard stopped there, sighing.

"That's a good story," the Assassin said, cutting into the silence, "but I'd rather hear the truth."

The Bard turned to him. "I beg your pardon, monsieur?"

"Knifing a spy, that I believe," said the Assassin. "But tailing a Ben-Hassrath team that was specifically on the lookout for opposition? I've come up against the horns a few times. No way you get close enough to overhear them without them knowing it."

"I have heard many things of the Tevinter Siccari," the Mortalitasi added, "but I have never heard them called cowards or traitors. Most of them come from slave families, and those families are kept safe as both promise and threat, ensuring the Siccari never flinch from their duties. You say that they broke and ran as soon as a single elf walked through the mirror. I know they would have attacked."

Charter sighed. "There are many liars at this table," she said, "some more talented than others. I ask for my life."

The Assassin turned to her. "What are you on about?"

"Please," said the Mortalitasi with a sniff, "you expect us to believe that a group of ex-templars found your safe house, and came in such number that you had no choice but to surrender your great treasure? You expect us to believe that a stray arrow flew threw the window and struck the sleeping elf, who lay on the ground?"

The Assassin stood. "Oh, that's how it is, eh?" His blade came out of its sheath, glittering in the firelight. "Then I suppose we should ask how

an expert mage like yourself didn't figure out that she was helping in a *blood magic* ritual. You and your friends knew the whole time—you let him kill his slaves because you wanted to see what he could do."

The Mortalitasi held out a hand, and her staff leaped to her grasp, crackling with purple fire. The eyes of the silver figures holding the amethyst crystal began to glow, a handful of tiny pinpricks of glittering light. "There were no templars. You sold the idol to the Tevinter contact yourself, getting more money than the elf could offer, and then when your men were dying in their sleep and arrows came through the windows, you slit the elf's throat yourself to ensure he could not finger you as the one to blame."

The Assassin grinned. "Not bad. Tell me, I'm just a dwarf, and I don't know much about spirits. What would make those corpses fight for you? Would blood magic bind them to do it? How did your friend die, again? You said she took a blow from behind? I'm just asking because I recall that the big dog in your story said that you were dead if you ever bound spirits again."

The Mortalitasi went even paler than usual. "Charter, you have wasted my time."

"I fear I have *ended* your time." Charter shut her eyes and took a slow sip of tea, and then she quietly repeated, "I ask for my life."

"I'm not killing you, elf," the Assassin muttered. "I need to get something useful out of this. Word has it you saw that blasted elf every day in Haven. You must know something, even if you were stupid enough not to see it at the time."

"I'm not asking you," Charter said. "And if you think I regret not seeing Solas for what he was when he served the Inquisition, you are correct. I was outplayed. I will regret it forever, and I will never make the same mistake again."

"How can you be certain, *mademoiselle*?" the Bard asked.

She looked across the table at him, at his face was still hidden under his dragon mask.

"By observing several small tells, and three large ones," she said finally, keeping her voice steady. "First, that few Orlesian bards would learn to speak the Qunari tongue but not elven, and fewer of those who do not speak elven would know the elven word *eluvian*, for the mirrors that let the ancient elves travel from place to place. Second, that the

Executor has not moved since you touched his hand while he and the Assassin argued. And third . . . that you never drank your tea."

The Assassin and the Mortalitasi turned.

"I know you hate the taste of tea," Charter said softly. "It was a joke around Skyhold. Why would you order it?"

"*Because* it was a joke around Skyhold," the man in the dragon mask. He sounded tired. "I was uncertain this costume would suffice, so I did everything that the Dread Wolf would not . . . except, it seems, bring myself to drink the tea."

"I ask for my life," Charter said a third time.

The Assassin and the Mortalitasi both sprang, and the eyes behind the dragon mask blazed with a fiery light for a moment.

"*Ar lasa mala*," he said, and his Orlesian accent was gone, replaced by the rolling lilt that was almost Dalish, but not quite. "I grant it to you."

The Assassin and the Mortalitasi were still where they stood, their skin and clothes suddenly the gray of dead, dull stone.

The man in the mask stood, sighed, and took the staff from the Mortalitasi statue's hand. He took the stirring stick from just below the gem at the head of the staff, drew it out, and held it for a moment. "You are free," he murmured. The stirring stick glowed for a moment in his hands, and then a wisp of energy flickered away.

He turned back to Charter and removed the mask, tossing it carelessly to the table, and she saw his face again, just as she had seen it for all those months at Haven and Skyhold, never suspecting a thing. An elf, bald—the golden locks had been part of the mask. An oval face with full lips, and a tiny scar on his brow. Pointed ears, previously hidden under the mask and wig.

"Excellent work on the Executor," Charter said. "You petrified him, but not his robes."

"I would caution you in dealing with those across the sea," he said. "They are dangerous."

"More dangerous than the elf who threatens the world?" Charter asked, and was rewarded with a twitch of his lips that acknowledged the point. "Why did you come? Why you personally?"

"I wished to know what you all knew," he said, gesturing at the table. "There are many of you, and you are not fools. As for me coming in person . . . the Inquisition was involved." He returned to his seat. "Why did *you* come?"

She shook her head helplessly. “Because you told the Inquisitor that you were going to destroy this world,” she said. “Did you expect us *not* to try to stop you?”

He sighed. “It was a moment of weakness. I told myself that it was because you all deserved to know, to live a few years in peace before my ritual was complete. Before this world ended.”

“Then perhaps we are not the only ones you lied to,” Charter said. “You do not have to do this.”

His look pinned her. “I have no choice. What I am doing will save this world, and those like you—the elves who still remain—may even find it better, when it is done.”

Charter considered lying, but then she thought of Tessa, with her quick smile and strong hands. “There are those I care for who would not.”

He smiled sadly. “I know that feeling well. I am not a god, Charter. I am prideful, hotheaded, and foolish, and I am doing what I must. When you report back to the Inquisitor . . .” His voice faltered. “Say that I am sorry.”

He walked away, and Charter remained still until the curtain closed behind him.

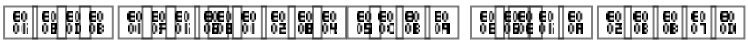
Then she drank the rest of her tea, her fingers shaking a little. She looked at the dragon mask on the table.

Prideful, hotheaded, foolish. Doing what he must. Sympathetic to elves. Said that he was sorry.

The red lyrium idol was of a crowned figure comforting another.

It was not much, but it was more than she had known before, she thought. Pulling a small notebook from one pocket, she began to write her report.

After all, the Dread Wolf wasn’t going to stop himself.

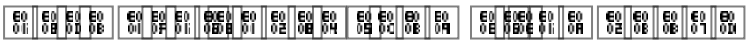


BY LIANE MERCIEL

The Grey Wardens are heroes across Thedas once again: the Archdemon has been defeated with relative ease and the scattered darkspawn are being driven back underground. The Blight is over. Or so it seems.

Valya, a young elven mage recently recruited into the Wardens, has been tasked with studying the historical record of previous Blights in order to gain insight into newly reported, and disturbing, darkspawn phenomena. Her research into the Fourth Blight leads her to an encoded reference scrawled in the margins of an ancient map, and to the hidden diary of Issenya, one of the last of the fabled griffon riders. As the dark secrets buried in Isseyna's story unfold, Valya begins to question everything she thought she knew about the heroic Grey Warden…

TITAN



BY PATRICK WEEKES

Journey into the darkest and deadliest part of Orlais, where the weight of titles matters less than the strength of blades.

Empress Celene of Orlais rose to the throne of the most powerful nation in Thedas through wisdom, wit, and ruthless manipulation. Now the empire she has guided into an age of enlightenment is threatened from within by imminent war between the templars and the mages, even as rebellion stirs among the downtrodden elves. To save Orlais, Celene must keep her hold on the throne by any means necessary.

Alliances are forged and promises broken as the battle for the throne of Orlais rages. But in the end, the elves who hide in the forests or starve in the alienages may decide the fate of the masked empire.

TITAN

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